

BEYOND FANTASY FICTION

NO MORE STARS
By Charles Satterfield

JULY 1954
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no

THE difference between death under the juggernaut treads of a bulldozer, run amok in northern Saskatchewan, and buoyant health was—three nights' sleep. Or was it a hundred years? A thousand? Ten thousand?

Hanson didn't know, couldn't know. All he knew was that he *was*. But where and when? It was the day after the man with the knife, the masked man who, with

two masked companions, had invaded his sickroom shouting insanely, "Death to Dave Hanson! Now the egg breaks! Death to the dead!"

Only to be blocked at his bedside by an invisible wall, a wall woven by the Sather Karf, the elderly senior physician, who had stood in the doorway, like an avenging Moses, and tossed at the intruders invisible garrotes that

more stars

It was the rottenest of tricks—to bring a man back from the dead to do a completely hopeless job—with the same punishment whether he failed or succeeded!

By CHARLES SATTERFIELD

Illustrated by VIDMER

had strangled them where they stood.

It was this element of magic, combined with the most sterile and efficient hospital practices, that caused Hanson to ponder the *when* of his reawakening. White hot salamanders that burned out fever but not flesh — combined with cortisone. Astrological mumbo-jumbo — and antibiotics. And alarmed talk of a falling sky . . .

HE looked up at Nema, the nurse who stood by his bed. If he had been dead — as surely he must have been — he was dead no more. The soft, creamy firmness of her skin, skin that goes so rarely but so perfectly with pale red hair and deep blue eyes—the charm of a lush young female figure that not even a nurse's starched whites could constrain—represented the strongest possible link between Dave Hanson, Chicago computer technician summoned to the knockabout, dangerous life of a highway builder in northern Canada by an engineering genius of an uncle too rich and prominent to be denied — and Dave Hanson, here.

Wherever *here* was.

Nema said softly, with just a suggestion of charming huskiness, "Good morning, Sagittarian. Get out of bed."

Warily, expecting the worst, Hanson swung his feet over the

side and sat up. No dizziness? No weakness? To his amazement, there was neither. Feeling better than he could recall feeling in his life, he touched tentative foot to the floor, slowly tested his balance by half-standing, propped against the high hospital bed.

"Come on," said Nema with an edge of impatience. "You're all right now. We entered your sign an hour ago." She turned her back to take something out of a chest against the wall, added, "Ser Perth will be here in a moment. He'll want you up and dressed."

A little annoyed at this suddenly unsympathetic female, Hanson stood free of the bed and flexed his muscles. He felt like an athlete in peak condition. Glancing down at his body, he noted with amazement that the bulldozer seemed to have left no scars.

He said, "Where in hell am I?"

The girl dumped an armload of clothing on his bed and looked at him with controlled exasperation. "That's the hundredth time you've asked me that, at least. And, for the hundredth time, I'll tell you that you're here. Look around you — see for yourself." She picked up a shirt of heavy-duty khaki from the pile on the bed and handed it to him. "Get into this," she commanded. "Dress first, talk later."

And she rustled starchily out of the room.

Dave Hanson did as she ordered.

ed. He was wearing something with a vague resemblance to a short hospital nightgown — if you ignored the pentacles woven into it and the fact that the clasp that held it together was a silvery crux ansata. He took it off and hurled it into a corner to relieve his feelings.

He picked up the khaki shirt and put it on — then, with growing curiosity, the rest of the garments, until he came to the shoes. Khaki shirt, khaki breeches, a wide webbed belt, a flat-brimmed hat. And the shoes — they were knee-length leather boots-and-leggings of a type that Hanson had not seen since the silent movies of his youth!

HE looked down at himself curiously when he was dressed. He was costumed as the outrageously unrealistic Hollywood idea of a heroic engineer, ready to drive a canal through an isthmus or throw a dam across a raging river. He was about as far from the appearance of the actual blue-denim and leather-jacketed engineers he had worked with as a Maori was.

Hanson shook his head wonderingly. He spotted a door which looked as if it might lead to a bathroom. Behind a bathroom door might be a full-length mirror. He tried it. He was wrong about its being a bathroom — it was a closet — but it did have a mirror.

What he saw nearly set his recovery back altogether.

When Nema came back into the room, he croaked in fright, "Never mind where I am — *who* am I?"

She stared at him. "You're Dave Hanson."

"The hell I am!" He pointed shakily at the mirror. "I've looked at my face for thirty-one years. *That* isn't it! Oh, there's a resemblance, I admit — change the chin, lengthen the nose, make the eyes brown instead of blue—it might be me. But not the way it is! What was it, plastic surgery?"

The girl's expression softened. "I'm sorry, Dave Hanson," she said gently. "I should have thought to warn you. You were a difficult conjuration — and even the easy ones can go wrong, these days. We did our best. I'm sorry if we didn't get your face just right."

Hanson swallowed, and looked at himself again. "Well," he said, "I guess it could be worse. In fact, I guess it was worse — once I get used to this face, I think I may come to like it. But it was quite a shock for a sick man."

Nema said sharply, "Are you sick?"

"Well . . . no."

"Then, why did you say you were? You shouldn't be. I told you, we're in the sign of Sagittarius now. You can't be sick in your own sign. Don't you even know that much?"

HANSON didn't get a chance to answer. The man called Ser Perth was suddenly in the doorway. It was irritating, Hanson thought, the way these people suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Rubber-soled shoes, no doubt—a silly way for grown people to act.

"Come with me, Dave Hanson," said Ser Perth, without wasting words. He was the physician who had been most in attendance on Hanson, under the supervision of the patriarchal Sather Karf.

And even sillier, Dave thought as he followed the man out the door and along a shadowy corridor, how little they bothered to check the condition of a man fresh off his death bed. In any of the hospitals he had known, there would have been hours or days of X-rays, blood tests, temperature taking and pulse counting. These people took a look at you and said, "Get up."

But, to do them justice, they seemed to be right. He had never felt better. That twaddle about Sagittarius would have to be cleared up sometime—didn't it have something to do with astrology?—but, for the time being, he was in pretty good shape.

He was put in even better shape rather rapidly. At the end of the dim corridor was an unexpectedly ordinary room that could have been nothing but a barber shop. A

man who looked like every barber Hanson had ever known—down to the wavy black hair and rat-tailed comb protruding from his pocket—shaved off Hanson's accumulated stubble, trimmed the shaggy tufts over his ears and at the back of his neck, then snapped the cloth off him with a bow.

The only odd thing Hanson noticed was that the lather containing his beard stubble, along with the hair-clippings that a silent attendant swept from the floor, were carefully locked away in a screw-topped glass jar as Ser Perth led him out. But Hanson quickly reassured himself upon that. This place was some sort of hospital and, undoubtedly, they were taking some sort of precaution against the spread of communicable disease—or something. Or what?

Hanson felt a prickle of something far down in his memory concerning beard stubble and hair clippings—something that seemed to tie in with astrology and salamanders and curious symbols. He tried to dig it out, as one digs a bothersome berry seed from between two teeth, but it resisted being brought to light . . .

AND, of course, he had no time. They were in the corridor again—it *had* to be the same corridor, though this time it was brightly lighted and Hanson couldn't remember having seen the

scarlet carpet they were walking on — and it was only a few short steps to the door of the room they were going to. Ser Perth silently opened the door and held it for Hanson to enter.

The room was very large and sparsely furnished. Sitting cross-legged on a cushion near the door was the nurse, Nema, working something in her hands — a cluster of colored threads, partly woven into a rather garish pattern. On a raised bench between two high windows sat the ancient Sather Karf, leaning on a staff and staring at Hanson.

Hanson stepped inside and the door closed behind him. Nema tied a complex knot in the threads and paused, waiting.

The old man looked silently at Hanson for a moment. Then he sighed. "All right," he said, "it's not much, but we must work with what we have. Dave Hanson, come here."

Hanson moved forward—almost without volition, like a clockwork man whose lever is pushed. He stood there before that raised bench bathed in the sunset light from the windows, and listened while the old man talked.

It was very much like the meanderings of a drug addict. Insane as the inverse logic of a psychotic. But, in his heart, Hanson knew one thing—it was true.

True — he had been killed, and

now he was alive. Resurrected?

True—this world was not his world. This culture was linked with the milieu to which he had been born only by the vision of dreamers.

True — he was . . . no longer human.

The old man said softly, "Mandrake man, we have conjured you to perform us a service. In your —place, your body was crushed under a huge engine. We gave you life. Now we exact payment."

Hanson felt a constriction drop away from him and, for the first time, was able to speak. "What do you want?" he managed to ask.

"Your services," said the Sather Karf. "For *your* life, ours. We need help, Dave Hanson. Look out the window."

HANSON looked. The sunset colors were still vivid. He peered through the crystalline glass. Before him was a city, bathed in orange and red, towering like the skyline of a dozen cities he had seen — and yet, not like any. The buildings were huge and many-windowed, but some were straight and tall, some were squat and fairy-colored and some blossomed from thin stalks into impossibly bulbous, minareted domes, like long-stemmed tulips reproduced in stone. Haroun-al-Rashid might have recognized that city. Mayor Wagner, never.

"Look at the sky, Dave Hanson," said the old man.

Hanson obediently looked up at the sky.

The sunset colors were not those of any sunset he remembered. The sun was bright and blinding overhead, surrounded by reddish clouds, glaring down on the fairy city.

The sky was — blotchy. It was daylight but, through the clouds, bright stars were shining. A corner of the horizon was winter blue. A whole sweep of it was dead, featureless black.

It was a nightmare sky, an impossible sky.

Hanson's eyes bulged as he looked at it. He said fearfully, "What — what's the matter with it?"

"What, indeed," said the old man as Hanson turned back to face him. In the corner of the room, Nema looked up for a moment, and there was compassion in her eyes before she turned back to her endless weaving of knots. The old man said heavily, "If I knew what had happened to the sky, would I be dredging the muck of the eons for the like of you, Dave Hanson?"

The Sather Karf stood up lightly for his years, looking down on Hanson.

He said, "The sky is falling, mandrake man. We look to you to put it together again."

II

SER PERTH said, "This will be your office, Dave Hanson. Did the Sather Karf tell you what to do?"

Nema answered for him. "Only that he was to repair the sky, Ser Perth. I've got a copy of the notes for you if you like." She extended the woven cords.

"I'll look at it later. Dave Hanson, you are our best remaining hope. We know this must be so, because the fanatics of the egg have tried so hard to kill you. Three times they failed — though once they came close enough, I know. But they would not have tried at all if they were not convinced through their arts that you can succeed."

Dave began diffidently. "Well, I . . ."

"Knowing that you *can* succeed," Ser Perth went on smoothly, "we know that you will succeed, Dave Hanson. It is my unpleasant duty to point out to you the thing that will happen if you fail. I say nothing of the fact that you owe us your life — it may be a small enough gift and one quickly taken away again. I say only that you have no escape from us."

"We have the cuttings of your hair and your beard — we have the parings of your nails, five cubic centimeters of your spinal fluid and a scraping from your liver,

Dave Hanson. We have your body now and, though you can take it beyond our reach, you can never hope to free your soul." He looked at Hanson piercingly. "Would you like your soul to live on in a mandrake root?"

Hanson said, "I guess not. I—look, Ser Perth, you're just confusing me. I don't know what you're talking about. I swear to God I don't! Start at the beginning, won't you? I was killed — all right, if you say I was, I was. You brought me back to life with a mandrake root and spells — you can do anything you want to with me. I admit it. I'll admit anything you say, because you know what's going on, and I don't. But what's this about the sky falling? If it *is* falling, what's the difference? If it makes a difference, what has it got to do with *me*?"

Ser Perth sighed heavily. "Ignorance," he murmured to himself. "Always ignorance! Listen, Dave Hanson. Don't bother to take this down, Nema." He sat down on the corner of what was evidently going to be Hanson's desk. He took a cigarette — Hanson *thought* it was a cigarette, though the smoke was bright green — from his pocket and placed it, already lit, between his lips. He said, "In your world, you were versed in the sciences — you, more than most. That you, brilliant as you were among your people, are so ignor-

ant, is a sad commentary on your world. But that is no matter now. Surely, you must have known the composition of the sky?"

HANSON said haltingly, "Well, I suppose so. The atmosphere is oxygen and nitrogen, mostly. The blue color is due to the scattering of light, isn't it? Light rays diffracting in the air?"

"Beyond the air," Ser Perth said impatiently. "The sky itself!"

"Oh! You mean space. Well, that's just vacuum, of course. Emptiness — and the stars are like our sun, but much more distant. The planets . . ."

"Ignorance and superstition," said Ser Perth, amazed. "The sky is no such thing, Dave Hanson. The sky is a solid sphere that surrounds Earth. The stars are no more like the sun than fiery Lucifer is like my cigarette. They are lights on the inside of the sphere, moving in the patterns of the Star Art, nearer to us than the hot lands to the south."

"Fort," Hanson said. "Charles Fort said that in a book."

Ser Perth shrugged. "Then why make me say it again? This Fort was right, whoever he may have been. On the dome, the stars—and the dome is cracking."

"What's beyond the dome?"

Ser Perth said somberly, "My greatest wish is that I die before I learn. In your world, had you

discovered that there were such things as elements? That is, basic substances which, in combination, produce—”

“Oh, of course,” Hanson interrupted.

“Good. Well, of the four elements—” Hanson gulped, but kept silent—“of the four elements is composed the universe. Some things are composed of a single element—some of two, some of three. The proportions vary and the humors and spirits change. But all things, living or dead, are composed of the elements. And only the sky is composed of all four elements—of earth, of water, of fire, of air—in equal proportions. One part of each, each lending its own essential quality to the mixture, so that the sky is solid as earth, radiant as fire, formless as water, insubstantial as air.

“And the sky is cracking and falling, Dave Hanson. You have seen it for yourself. Already, the effects are felt. Gamma radiation floods through the gaps. The quick-breeding viruses are mutating through half the world, faster than the Medical Art can control them, so that millions of us are sneezing and choking—and dying, too, for lack of antibiotics and proper care. Air travel is now a perilous thing—just today, a stratosphere-roc crashed head-on into a fragment of the sky and was killed with all his passengers.

“Worst of all, the Magical Art suffers. For, on the dome of the sky, are the stars. And, with the crumbling of the dome, the courses of the stars themselves are corrupted. It’s pitiful magic that can be worked without regard to the conjunctions of the planets—but it is all the magic that is left to us. When Mars trines Neptune, the Medical Art is weak. Even while we were conjuring you up, the trine occurred. It almost cost us your life.”

THERE was silence. Hanson thought furiously, but his mind was a treadmill—he could reach no sane conclusion. Perhaps, he told himself, he was killed by the bulldozer, and these are the last insane thoughts of a dying brain. Perhaps it’s all a dream. Perhaps . . .

He couldn’t doubt the reality of the rather feminine, little thin-mustached man before him. He could never have dreamed that impossible, but certainly real, sky. He finally said weakly, “Could I have something to eat?”

Ser Perth clapped his hands. “Behind you,” he said impatiently. “But wait until I have gone. Is all clear to you, Dave Hanson?”

“All but one thing. What do you want me to do?”

Ser Perth shrugged. “Repair the sky. It should be easy for a man of your talents. You drove a high-

way through the worst, the coldest, the barrenest, meanest country in your world. You are one of the great engineers of history, Dave Hanson, so great that your fame has penetrated even to our world, through the viewing pools of our wisest historians.

"There was a monument to you in your world, inscribed, 'Dave Hanson, to whom nothing was impossible.' Well, we have a nearly impossible task—a task of engineering and building. If our Magical Art could be relied on . . . but it cannot. It never can be, until the task is done. We have the word of history—no task is impossible to Dave Hanson."

Hanson looked at the other man's smug face and a slow grin crept over his own, in spite of himself. "Ser Perth, you've made a little mistake. I'm—"

"You're Dave Hanson," Ser Perth said flatly. "Of all the powers of the Margical Art, the greatest lies in the true name. We evoked you by the name of Dave Hanson. You *are* Dave Hanson. And deceit will earn you only our severest displeasure."

He left.

Hanson stared after him sickly, and then around the office, where he was supposed to begin the impossible. And, perhaps, to David Arnold Hanson, the famed engineer, no task was impossible. But quite a few things were impossible

to David Arnold Hanson's obscure and unimportant nephew, the computer-technician and generally undistinguished man who had been christened after the greater man.

Now, all he had to do was to repair the sky! Move over, Chicken Little!

HE stared up at its crazy patch-work from the window. For all he knew, in such a sky, cracks might appear. In fact, even as he looked, he could make out a rift and, beyond that, a-hole—or at least a small patch where there was no color, yet where the sky was not black. There were no stars there, though points of light were clustered around the edges, apparently in full retreat.

"I suppose you've got a sample of the sky that's fallen?" he asked Nema. "And what the heck are you doing here, anyhow? I thought you were a nurse."

She frowned at him but went to a corner, where a small ball of some clear crystalline substance stood. She muttered into it, while a surly face stared out. Then she nodded. "They are bringing some of the sky. As to being a nurse, of course I am. Surely one so skilled can also be a secretary, even to the great Dave Hanson? As to why I'm here . . ." She dropped her eyes, frowning, while a touch of added color reached her cheeks. "In the sleep spell I used, I in-

voked that you should be well and true, but by a slip I phrased it that I wanted you well and true. Hence, well and truly do I want you."

"Huh?" He stared at her, watching the blush deepen. "You mean . . . ?"

"Take care! First you should know that I am proscribed as a duly registered virgin. And in this time of need, the magic of my blood must not be profaned." She twisted sidewise, and then dashed up and to the door, just before it opened to show a dull clod, entirely moronic, holding up a heavy weight of nothing. "Your sample of sky," she said as the clod labored over to his desk and dropped it with a dull clanking sound.

It was, of course, nothing. But if nothing was a vacuum, this was an extremely hard and heavy one. It seemed to be about twelve inches on a side, in its rough shape, and must have weighed two hundred pounds. He tapped it and it rang. But, when he touched it gently, his hand slipped through it easily. Inside, a tiny point of light danced frantically back and forth.

"A star," she said sadly.

Inquiry eventually produced the facts that he had a complete laboratory at his disposal, as well as a staff waiting to do his work. He followed her down endless corridors while she catalogued its

contents, from pedigreed bats and dried unicorn horn to a genuine blind basilisk. "The deepest, darkest and dankest cave of all is your laboratory," she finished.

Then she stopped. "Or would you say construction camp? There, we've conjured up such tools as were used on your world, have we not?"

He'd been considering a plea of inability to work without such things. He was reasonably sure, by now, that they had no spectrometers, signal generators or bunsen burners here, and a delay might have given him time to find out what went on. But, it seemed, they'd considered everything. He nodded.

"Then why didn't you say so?" she asked sharply. She let out a sudden string of sibilants and dropped into a sitting position on the rug. Behind her, the dull clod carrying the piece of sky fell flat.

THE carpet lifted uncertainly. She made the sounds again and it rose up, curling at the front like a toboggan. Dave grunted and dropped down beside her. The carpet gathered speed, sailed out of the corridor and began gaining altitude. They went soaring over the city at about thirty miles an hour, heading toward what seemed to be barren land beyond. "Sometimes rugs fall now," she told him. "But, so far, only if the

words are incorrectly pronounced."

He gulped. Of all things, a flying carpet—and he was riding it! He looked gingerly at the city below. As he did so, one of the tall, slender buildings began to smoke. It suddenly blossomed into a huge cloud of pink gas that drifted away, to show people and objects dropping like stones to the ground below. Nema sighed and looked up at the sky. As she did so, there was a great tearing sound of thunder. Something invisible went zipping downward in front of them, stirring up the air and bouncing the carpet savagely.

"It grows worse," she muttered. Then she gasped. "The *signs!* That break has disturbed the planets. We're moving in retrograde, back from Sagittarius! Now, we'll go back to the characters we had before—and just when I was getting used to the change."

He jerked his eyes off the new patch of nothing in the sky, in which a few stars seemed to be churning aimlessly. "Your character? Isn't anything stable here?"

"Of course not. Naturally, in each house, we have a differing of character, as does the earth itself. Why else should astrology be the greatest of the sciences?"

Why else? This was a strange world. And yet, it explained some things. He'd been vaguely worried about the apparent change in

Ser Perth, who had changed from a serious and helpful doctor into a supercilious, high-handed fop. But—what about his own recovery, if that was supposed to be determined by the signs of the zodiac?

He had no time to ask. The carpet bucked and the girl began speaking to it urgently. It wavered, then righted itself, to begin sliding downward.

Below appeared a camp such as he might have seen in the same movie from which his clothes had been copied. There were well-laid-out rows of sheds, beautiful lines of construction equipment—such as tractors, designed for work in mud flats, and haulers, with the thin wheels used on rocky ground. He spotted a big generator humming busily—and then saw a work gang of some fifty men turning a big capstan that kept it going. And all around were neat racks of miscellaneous tools.

They landed in the middle of the camp, just as a parrot flew down and yelled something at Nema. She scowled and nodded. "I'm wanted back," she said. "Most of the men here . . ."

She pointed to the gangs that moved about, busily doing nothing, all in costumes similar to his. "They're mandrakes, conjured like you, but without souls, of course. The short man there is Sersa Garm. He's to be your foreman and he's real."

She sprang back on the carpet, then turned. "The Sather Karf says you have ten days to fix the sky," she said. Her hand came out to touch his. "You can do it, Dave Hanson. I have faith in you."

Then the carpet was sailing back toward the city.

Ten days to fix a sky that was falling!

DAVE HANSON could fix anything that contained electrical circuits or ran on tiny, jeweled bearings. He could repair almost nothing else. It wasn't stupidity or inability to learn—he simply had never been subjected to the discipline of construction engineering. Even on a project with his uncle, he'd seen only a little of the actual technique involved. He had merely run the computer that predicted what would be needed, directed the charges of the blasters and anticipated some of their problems. But, when he'd tried to build a closet in his Chicago apartment, he'd only succeeded in ruining the plastering job and had to call in an expert.

But he had no choice now—and, judging by the evidence he'd seen himself, his try had better be successful if he wanted to enjoy his magic-given life here.

Sersa Garm proved to be a glum, fat young man, in training for serthood, whatever that was. But he could tell nothing about the

trouble with the sky, beyond a rumor that one of the Satheri had made the sun stand still too long in some experiment, with the resulting heat starting the crack. They'd tried everything since, including the bleeding of eleven certified virgins for seven days.

But, when the blood was mixed with dragontooth and frogsdown and melded with a genuine philosopher's stone, they had used it as ink to scribe the right path of the planets in vain. The sky had cracked and a piece had fallen into the vat of blood, killing a Sather who was less than two thousand years old. Nor could they revive him, though bringing the dead back to life when the body was intact was routine magic for a mere Ser. It was then they'd conjured from Dave's world all the other experts.

"All?" Dave asked.

"All, or all they could find by name," Sersa Garm said. "The Egyptian pyramid builder, Cagliostro—and what a time we had finding *his* true name—some man with the name of a squash, who discovered your greatest science, dianetics. I helped one who was supposed to have solved all the secrets of the universe — gravity and something called relativity. But, when he was persuaded to help us, he gave up after one week, declaring your knowledge valueless. They were going to turn him

mandrake again, but he found some new formula in one of the magics and disappeared."

It was nice to know even Einstein had given up, Dave thought wryly. As comforting as the knowledge that there was no fuel for the equipment here, that all local electricity was d.c., conjured by commanding the electrons in a wire to move in one direction—and completely useless with the a.c. motors. It might have worked in a welding torch, but he had no such torch. He had to depend on an old-style blowtorch filled with a dozen live salamanders.

HE had made some progress, though, when three days were up. He had found that the piece of sky could be melted with some difficulty, when it turned solid black until it cooled. Also, that it was completely without weight when liquid. Now, if he could get a gang up the approximate thousand miles to the sky with enough torches to melt it completely, it might congeal again as a perfect sphere. Then, he'd have only the problem of getting the stars and planets back on their proper paths!

"The mathematician thought of that," Sersa Garm said sourly. "But it won't work. Even with such heat, the upper air is too filled with phlogiston, and no man can breathe it. Also, since phlogiston has negative weight, the liquid sky

would sink through it, while nothing else could rise into it. And phlogiston will quench the flame of a rocket. Your Einstein discovered that, too."

The man was a gold mine of information—all bad. The only remaining solution, apparently, was to raise a scaffolding over the whole planet to the sky, and send up mandrakes to weld back the broken pieces. With material of infinite strength—an infinite supply of it, at that—and with infinite time, it might have been worth considering.

Nema came back on the fourth day with no more cheering information. Her multi-times great-grandfather, the Sather Karf, regretted it but he must have good news at once for the populace. They were starving because the food multipliers could no longer produce reliable supplies. Otherwise, Dave would find venom being transported into his blood in increasing amounts until the pain drove him mad. And, just incidentally, the Sons of the Egg, those fanatics who'd attacked him in the hospital, had tried to reach the camp twice already, once by interpenetrating into a flying carpet. They meant to kill him somehow, and his defense was growing too costly to be carried on longer, unless he produced results.

Dave groaned as she took off. By nightfall, when she came back

from the city for his report, he was groaning steadily. The venom had arrived on schedule, ahead of her, and his blood seemed to be on fire.

SHE laid a cool hand on his forehead. "Poor Dave," she said. "If I were not registered and certified, sometimes I feel that I might . . . but no more of that. Ser Perth sends you this unguent, which will hold back the venom for a time, cautioning you not to reveal his kindness. And the Sather Karf wants the full plans at once."

He began rubbing on the ointment, which helped slightly. She peeled back his shirt to help him, apparently delighted with the hair which had sprouted on his chest since his reincarnation. The unguent helped, but it wasn't enough.

"What the hell does he expect me to do?" Dave asked hotly. "Snap my fingers thus, yell *abracadabra*, and have the whole sky . . ."

He stared at his fingers, where an egg had suddenly materialized.

Nema squealed delightedly. "What a novel way to conjure, Dave. Teach me the word!"

Then she squealed again, this time in warning. The egg was growing. It swelled to the size of a football, then was man-sized, then like a huge globe. Suddenly, one side split open and a group of masked men in dull colored robes

came spilling out of it.

"Die!" the one in front yelled. He lifted a double-bladed knife, charged for Dave and brought the knife down.

The blade went through clothing, skin, flesh and bones, straight for Dave's heart.

III

THE knife was in his chest. Hanson stared down at it stupidly. Incredibly, he was still alive!

Then the slow pain-nerves carried their message to the brain. He was alive, but in his chest was agony. Coughing and choking on what must be his own blood, he scrabbled at the knife and ripped it out. Blood jetted from the gaping rent in his clothing — jetted and slowed. Trickled—and stopped entirely.

But the pain didn't stop.

He heard shouting, quarreling voices, but nothing made sense through the painful haze. He felt someone clutch at him—more than one person—and then they were dragging him, willy-nilly, across the ground.

The outlines of the huge egg were closing around him.

The pain began to abate. But there was still the burning of the venom in his blood, along with a new torture—a wracking, squeezing feeling that Hanson couldn't account for.



He lurched to his feet and stared around him. He was within the egg. From the inside it was partly transparent, and he could see what must be the ground sweeping away beneath him. A man was standing outside the egg vainly grasping at it. The man shot up like a fountain, growing huge. He towered over them, until he was miles high and the giant structures Hanson was gaping at were the turned-up toes of shoes.

The egg was growing smaller.

A voice said tightly, "We're small enough, Bork. Can you raise the wind for us now?"

"Hold on!"

The egg tilted and soared. Hanson staggered, staring unbelievingly through the crystal shell. They rose like a Banshee jet and, in the cloudy distance, was a shaggy, monstrous colossus, taller than the Himalayas—the man who had been beside them.

Bork grunted, "Got it! We're all right now." He chanted something in a rapid undertone. Then, "All right, relax. That'll teach them to work resonance-magic inside a ring. Heaven knows how we would have got through otherwise. The Satheri must be going crazy. Wait a minute—this business tires the fingers."

The man called Bork halted the series of rapid passes he had been making, flexing his fingers with a grimace. Then he began, purpose-

fully, to go through a ritual gesture. The egg drifted, spun and darted off. There was a feeling of expansion, then they were drifting again.

Through the crystal, Hanson saw a hulking giant with a scarred face, grinning down at them. He was waving a feather fan gently, as though by it he was moving the egg along. The giant stopped waving and bellowed, his voice deep and rolling. "*There's the roc! Get along!*" He pointed with a finger like a redwood.

THE egg drifted gently, while the giant dragged things out of his pockets and used them in a complicated assembly. The tree-trunk fingers did a dance.

There was the feeling of growing once more.

It lasted only a second. Then they were falling swiftly. But a huge bird cruised beside them, drawing closer. It looked like a cross between a condor and a hawk, but its wing span must have been over a hundred feet. It slipped under the egg, catching the falling object on a cushionlike attachment between its wings. Then it struck off briskly toward the east.

Bork opened the side of the egg with a snap and stepped out, dragging Dave behind, and the others followed. He tapped the egg-shaped object and caught it as it

shrank. When it was small enough, he pocketed it.

Dave sat up. The wound in his chest was gone, though there was blood on his torn clothing. From the side, an incredulous cry broke out, and Nema was suddenly shaking him, staring at him, burying her face in his shoulder. "Dave! You're *alive!*"

Dave hadn't figured that out yet himself. But Bork snorted. "Of course he is. Why'd we take him along with you hanging on if he was dead? When the setha-knife kills them, they stay dead—or they don't die. Sagittarian?"

She nodded and the big man calculated. "Yeah. It would be. There was one second there when all the signs were at their absolute maximum favorableness. Must have said the spells then."

The bird dipped toward the ground. Going at a hundred miles an hour, it landed against a small entrance to a cave in the hillside. Except for the one clear patch where the bird had lighted, they were in the midst of a forest.

Dave and Nema were hustled into the cave, while the others melted into the woods, studying the skies. Nema clung to Dave, crying something about how the Sons of the Egg would torture them.

"All right," he said finally. "Who are these sons of eggs?"

"Monsters," she told him. "They used to be the anti-magic party.

They hated the Satheri. While magic produced their food and made a world for them, they hated it because they couldn't do it for themselves. And a few renegade priests like my brother joined them."

"Your brother?"

"She means me," Bork said. He came in and dropped to his haunches quietly. "I used to be a stooge for Sather Karf, before I got sick of it. How do you feel, Dave Hanson?"

DAVE considered it in growing surprise. "I feel good. Even the venom the Sather Karf was putting in my blood doesn't hurt." Crazy or not, he decided, this scarred new world had its points.

"Good. Means he believes we killed you—must have the report by now. And he won't give chase, that being so. He's not so bad, Dave, but some of these Satheri . . . Well, you figure how you'd like to have your wife magicked away from you by the first priest who wanted her—and then sent back with enough magic to be a witch and make life hell for you because she'd been kicked out by the priest. Or anything else you wanted and couldn't keep against magic. Sure, they fed us—they had to, after they took away our fields and our kine, and made it useless for us to earn our living in the old way. And they made us slaves. It's a fine world

for them, if they can keep the egg from breaking."

"What is all this egg nonsense?"

Bork shrugged. "Common sense. Why should there be a sky shell around the planet? Look, there's a legend here. Long ago, or perhaps far away—anyway, there was once a world called Thera and another called Erath. Two worlds, separate and distinct, on their own branching time-paths. One was a world of rule and law—I think it must have been something like your world, Dave Hanson. The other was—chaos. A world of anarchy, you understand. Terrible place to live, I guess."

He hesitated somberly. "As terrible as this one is getting to be," he added. "Anyway, there were the two worlds in their own timelines. You know, I suppose, how worlds of probability separate and diverge as time goes on? Well—these worlds reversed the process. They *coalesced*."

He looked searchingly at Hanson. "Do you see it—the two timelines coming together? Don't ask me to explain it. It was long ago and all I know for sure is that it happened. The two worlds met, fused and, out of the two, came *this* world, in what the books call 'The Dawnstruggle.' When it was over, our world was as it has been for thousands of centuries."

He scratched his head. "There is doubt in my mind," he admitted,

"whether or not all worlds have a shell around them. I don't know. But our world does and the shell is cracking. The Satheri don't like it—they want to stop it. We want it to happen. For the two lines, you see, met and fused and made one. Doesn't that tell you anything, Dave Hanson? Don't you see it, the male principle and the female, the egg that is fertile? When the egg hatches, you don't try to put it back together!"

HE looked like a fanatic, Hanson told himself. Crazy or not, he took this business of the hatching egg seriously. Hanson said, "What is it going to hatch into?"

The big man shrugged. "Does a chick know it is going to become a hen? How can we tell?"

Hanson considered it. "Don't you even have a guess?"

Bork said shortly, "No."

He looked worried, Hanson thought, and guessed that even the fanatics were not quite sure they wanted to be hatched.

Bork added, "An egg has got to hatch, that's all there is to it. We prophesied this, oh, two hundred years ago. The Satheri laughed. Now they don't laugh, but they want to stop it. What happens when a bird is stopped from hatching? Does it die? Of course—and we don't want to die. No, Dave Hanson, we don't know what hap-

pens next—but we do know that we must find out. Nothing against you personally, of course, but you can't stop us. We can't let you. That's why we tried to kill you. If we could do it, we'd kill you now."

Hanson said reasonably, "You can't expect me to like it, you know. The Satheri, at least, saved my life—" He stopped in confusion.

Bork was laughing at him. "You mean . . . ? Dave Hanson, don't you know that the Satheri arranged to *kill* you first? They needed a favorable death conjunction to bring you back to life. They got it—by arranging an accident!"

Nema said hotly, "That's a lie!"

Bork shrugged. "Sure, you'd think so," he said mildly. "You're on *their* side."

Hanson considered this. It seemed as likely as anything else. He asked, "Why me?"

"Because you can put back the sky and restore the egg. At least, the Satheri think so and I must admit that, in some ways, they're smarter than we."

Hanson said, "But—"

"I know, I know," Bork went on wearily. "You're not the engineer. We know that—our pools are cleaner than those in the cities. But there is a cycle of confirmation. If the Satheri say a thing will happen, it *will* happen—though, perhaps, not in the way they expect. Unless, of course, it is stop-

ped. There was the monument. Not your monument, no. It was intended for your uncle. But the inscription bore your name, not his. Now prophecy is always strongest when based on coincidence—a prime rule. And those words prophesy that *you*—not your uncle—can do the impossible. So, what are we going to do with you?"

BORK'S directness was reassuring, somehow—it was nearer his own than any Dave had heard on this world. And the kidnapping was beginning to look like a relief. They'd gotten him off the hook. He grinned and stretched, tossing an arm around Nema. "If I'm unkillable, Bork, what can you do?"

The big man grinned back. "Flow rock around you up to your nose and toss you into a lake. You'd live there—but you wouldn't like it—for the next few thousand years! It's not as bad as being a mangrove with a soul—but it lasts longer. And don't think the Satheri can't still pull that trick. They have your name and your hair."

The conversation was suddenly less pleasant. Dave thought it over. "I could stay here and join you quietly—don't interrupt, Nema! The other alternatives won't help the sky, either!"

"They'd spot your aura. They'll be checking around here for a

while. Never mind, I'll think of something." Bork got up. "We might as well eat some food."

Bork fell to work with some scraps of food, then, abruptly, the scraps became a mass of sour smelling stuff. Bork shuddered, but ate it in silence, as did the others who came in to get their share. Nema and Dave scorned it.

Dave considered, then snapped his fingers. "Abracadabra," he said. He swore as a suddenly conjured candle burned his finger. He dropped it and tried again. The fourth time, he managed to get a bunch of bananas that weren't quite ripe. He kicked the conjured boxing glove and rusty knife aside and began eating, offering the others some.

Bork was thoughtful as he ate. Then he grimaced. "Magic!" he said. "Maybe *that's* the prophecy's meaning. I thought you knew no magic."

"I didn't," Dave told him. He was still tingling inwardly at the confirmation of his earlier discovery. It was unpredictable magic, but it apparently bore some vague relationship to what he was thinking.

"So, the lake's out," Bork decided. "With unknown powers at your command, you might escape. Well, that settles it. There's one place where nobody will look at you or listen to you. Even if you tried to turn yourself back to the

Satheri, it wouldn't work. And I'm fool enough to think you don't want them to find you."

HE suddenly plucked a hair from Nema's head. She screamed and darted for him. His fingers danced in the air and he spoke what seemed to be a name, though it bore no resemblance to Nema. She quieted, trembling. "One of the men has made a broom for you, little sister. Go back and forget that Dave Hanson lives. You saw him die and were dragged off with us and his body. You escaped before we reached our hideaway. By the knot I tie in your hair, and by your secret name, this is so."

She blinked slowly and looked around as Bork burned the knotted hair. Her eyes swept past Bork and Dave without seeing them and centered on a broom one man was holding. She seized it. A sob came to her throat. "The devil! The renegade devil! He didn't have to kill Dave! He didn't . . ."

Her voice died away as she raced toward the clearing.

Bork turned back to Dave. "Better strip and put this on." The thing he held out was a dirty, coarse, ragged scrap of cloth, apparently what was left of a pair of wide-legged pants. "The planets are fairly good for teleporting now. Be quick, before I change my mind and try the lake!"

Dave didn't see what he did, but there was a puff of flame in front of his eyes.

The next second, he stood manacled in a long line of men who were loaded with heavy stones. Over their backs fell the cutting lashes of a whip. And, far ahead, was a partially finished pyramid. He was obviously one of the slaves.

IV

SUNRISE. Hanson awakened under the bite of the lash. The overseers were shouting and kicking the slaves awake. Overhead, the marred sky shone in patch-quilt patterns.

Hanson stood up lightly, with the boundless strength that seemed to be built into his new body. But not all the slaves got up. The two beside him didn't move at all. Sleeping through that brutal awakening? Hanson looked closer and he knew. They weren't asleep—they were dead.

The overseer raged back along the line and saw them. "*Bastards!*" he yelled. "Lazy, worthless, work-dodging bastards!" He knelt furiously and thumbed down the eyelids of the corpses, though there was little need for the test—they were too limp, too waxen to be pretending.

The overseer cut them out of the chain and kicked at Hanson. "Move along!" he bellowed.

"Menes himself is here, and he's not as gentle as me!"

Hanson joined the long line. He was hungry. How the devil did they expect the slaves to put in a day's work without some kind of food? There had been nothing the night before but a skin of water—not even that much this morning. No wonder the two beside him had died, on a diet of overwork, beatings and plain starvation . . .

Menes was there, all right. Hanson saw him in the distance, a skinny giant of a man in breech-clout, cape and golden headdress. He bore a whip, like everyone else who seemed to have any authority at all, but wasn't using it. He was standing, hawklike, on a slight rise in the sandy earth, motionless and silent. Beside him was a shorter figure—a pudgy little man with a thin mustache, on whom the Egyptian headdress looked strangely out of place. *Ser Perth!*

Hanson's gaping came to an end as the lash came down again. He stumbled forward, heedless of the overseer's shouting. What was Ser Perth doing here? Had Bork slipped up—did Ser Perth know that Hanson was still alive? It seemed unlikely. The pudgy little man was paying no attention to the lines of slaves. More probably, Hanson thought, Ser Perth was supervising the supervisors, making an inspection tour of . . .

Of what?

Was this another of their frenzied efforts to put back the sky?

HANSON looked around approvingly. The long lines of slaves that had been carrying rock and rubble the day before were now being formed into hauling teams. Long ropes were looped around enormous slabs of quarried rock. There were rollers underneath them and slaves tugging and pushing at them. The huge stones moved slowly, remorselessly, forward onto the prepared beds of rubble. Hanson could not recall seeing the rock the night before. They had appeared as if by magic . . .

Why, certainly—by magic. But then, Hanson asked himself, why the slaves, why the whips? Why not simply use magic on the entire construction, whatever it was to be . . .

Once again the whip. The overseer ranted, "Get on, you blundering fool! Menes himself is looking at you. He—what the devil?"

The overseer's hand spun Hanson around. The man's eyes, large and opaque, stared at Hanson as he said unbelievingly, "You're the one! Didn't I take the hide off your back twice already? And not a scar, not a drop of blood!"

Hanson said feebly, "I—I heal quick." It was no more than the truth. As Ser Perth had reconstructed his body, he healed almost

before a blow was struck.

"Magic!" the overseer snorted and gave Hanson a shove that sent him sprawling. "Blithering magic again! Magical stones that melt when you get them in place—magical slaves that the whip won't touch! And they expect us to do a job! First, they magic every tool so that the man who made it wouldn't recognize it. Then, they come snooping and conjuring and interfering."

"Wheels on the rollers! Tools of steel and the-gods-know-what instead of honest stone! Tools to lift things instead of ropes to shrink or wood to swell-tools and magic and rush-rush-rush until I'm half—ah, you *would*, would you!" His voice trailed off into a fresh roar of rage as he caught sight of another slave on his knees, clutching at his throat, and raced off with the whip.

Hanson tried to make himself inconspicuous after that. The wounds would heal and the beatings would never kill. But there had been no provision in his reconstituted frame for the suppression of pain.

AT the expense of a hundred slaves and considerable deterioration of the whips, one block of stone was in place before the sun was high overhead in the mottled sky. Then there was—blessedly!—a moment's pause. Men

were coming down the long lines, handing something to the slaves. Food, thought Hanson gratefully . . .

He was wrong. When the slave with the wicker basket came closer, he could see that the contents were not food but some powdery substance that the bearers dipped out with carved spoons into the eager hands of the slaves. Hanson smelled his portion dubiously. Cloying, sickly sweet . . .

Hashish! Or opium, heroin, hemp — Hanson was no expert. But it certainly was some sort of drug. And, judging by the avid way the other slaves were gulping it down, each one of them had been exposed to it before. Hanson cautiously made a pretense of swallowing his before he allowed it to slip to the sands. Drug addiction—obviously, a convenient way to make the slaves forget their aches and fears, to keep them everlastingly anxious to please and do whatever was necessary to make sure the precious, deadly ration never stopped.

But still no food. And the pause in the labor was only for the length of time it took the drug-bearing slaves to complete their task. Ten minutes, perhaps fifteen—and then the overseers were back.

The slaves regrouped on new jobs, and Hanson found himself in a crew of a dozen or so. They

were lashing the hauling ropes around a twelve-foot block of stone. The rollers were already in place, the crudely plaited ropes dangling loose. Hanson found himself being lifted by a couple of slaves to the shoulders of a third. His clawing hands caught the top of the stone and the slaves below heaved him upward. He scrambled, knees and elbows flying, to the top and there caught the ropes that were flung up to him.

From his vantage point, he saw what he had not seen before—the size of the construction project. This was no Gizeh pyramid, no simple tomb for a king. Its base was measured in kilometers, not yards. Its top would be—how high? He could only wonder. As far as he could see, over the level sand, the ground was black with teeming thousands of slave gangs.

Were the idiots trying to reach the *sky*? They were.

LIKE the pride-maddened men of Babel, they were building a sky-high structure of stone. It was obviously impossible, Hanson knew—just about as impossible as all of this strange world, and all the things in it.

The falling sky was a problem that the warlocks below could not solve. They had looked for help. They had sought through the worlds and the ages for builders, engineers, constructors, anyone

who might have an answer, however improbable. Certainly, they were bound to call back the builders of the Pharaohs' tombs—as, with meticulous thoroughness, they had tried Hanson and Einstein and Cagliostro and, for all Hanson knew, a thousand more. They had tried everyone their seers could find who might bear a hand or try a technique, however faint the chance of success.

But a *pyramid*, Hanson objected to himself. Until he realized the essential fact of the world he was in. For an impossible task, perhaps, impossible means can best do the accomplishing.

"*Hey!*" One of the slaves below was waving at him. While Hanson looked down, puzzled, the slave called another, got a shoulder to lean on and walked his way up the side of the stone block, with Hanson tugging at his hands, the other slave pushing from below. "Look," the slave panted earnestly, "it's your hide, but I thought I better warn you—watch out for that guy. Don't just stand around when *he's* here." He picked up a loop of rope, passed it to Hanson and made a great show of hard work.

Hanson said, "What guy?"

"*Him.*" The slave jerked a thumb at a dour, slow-moving overseer, who was walking stiffly toward them. "I'm warning you, he's a mandrake. You don't want

to mess around with *him*."

Hanson looked at the ancient, weathered face of the approaching mandrake. He passed ropes around the corners until the mandrake turned and rigidly marched away, the blows of his whip falling with metronome regularity on the backs of the slaves he passed. "Thanks," said Hanson. "Is it so bad, being a mandrake?"

"Depends," the slave answered. "Some mandrake men are real, you know? I mean, they want somebody that they can't just call back, maybe because, with the sky collapsing and all, the spells aren't working just right. So they rebuild him around a mandrake. That's not so bad. If they'd done that with me, I'd have come out a lot better than I did—you know, they straighten you out a little when they do it. But this kind, like *him*—they never were human. Bad business."

"Um," said Hanson. He worked silently for a minute. Then he worked closer to the slave and said, "You been here long?"

"Long enough," the man said sourly. "Name's Ricci—from Pittsburgh, U. S. A. Twentieth Century, Earth. You?"

"Same place!" said Hanson fervently. "But I'm from Chicago! I—I kind of thought all the slaves were Egyptian."

"Nah. A lot of them are, sure, but—hey, what's with you?"

HANSON was staring at him in bewilderment. He shook his head. All of a sudden Ricci's face rang a bell in his mind. He said wonderingly, "Didn't—aren't you the one I saw dead on his back, right next to me this morning?"

"Guess so," Ricci said bitterly. "I'm getting damn sick and tired of it, too. Fifth time I died this month. I don't like it." He tied a swift knot in the ropes and stood up, staring searchingly at the net of cording around the stone. "Um, looks all right now," he said. "These damn overseers, they won't feed you because it takes time and wastes food. They let you die and, just about when you're getting comfortable, *zing*, they drag you back. It ain't fair."

Hanson swallowed. Some things were still a little hard to take. "You were dead, back in Pittsburgh, I mean?"

"Sure. They got fifteen of us in a batch—me and five more in my outfit, and nine from the South Side. Wish I had one of those sawed-off shotguns now," he said reminiscingly. "I'd sure take a—Well, I ain't got one. They like to drag us back in bunches, you know. That's why you see so many Injuns. They got a batch of them, twenty thousand or so, from a place called Tenochtitlan. Aztecs they were—all twenty thousand of them got sacrificed in a bunch for some reason or other."

He tested a rope, then sat on the edge of the rock. "Watch it," he warned. "That overseer has his eyes on you. You stay up here and keep the ropes tight, while we see if this thing moves." He slipped over the side, hung by his fingertips and dropped, rolling over as he landed.

Hanson swallowed and tried to act busy. The mandrake overseer had moved ponderously toward him again. But, in a moment, he turned away again.

Hanson sighed and braced himself as the lines of slaves beneath him settled themselves to the rope. They strained and tugged and the stone began ever so slowly to move.

Hanson checked the rigging with half his mind, while the other half raced in a crazy circle of speculation.

Mandrakes and mandrake men—corpses, plurally dead, many times revived. What a place to live!

THERE was a sudden, coruscating flare from above.

Hanson instinctively flung his forearm over his eyes. He squinted fearfully. For a crazed second he thought that the sun had gone nova, that the end of the world had come.

Something had happened to the sun. It was flickering and flaming, shooting enormous jets of fire from

its rim. It seemed to be moving, wobbling, careening, drawing near.

There was a massive shriek of fear and panic from the horde of slaves, a bellow like the collective death-agony of a world. The slaves dropped their ropes and ran in panicked, random directions, the human overseers with them. Only the mandrakes stood stolidly in place, precisely flicking with their whips each running man who passed them.

Hanson flung himself face down on the stone. There was a roaring, rushing, thundering noise from overhead.

Then the thunderbolt of Thor himself blasted in Hanson's ear.

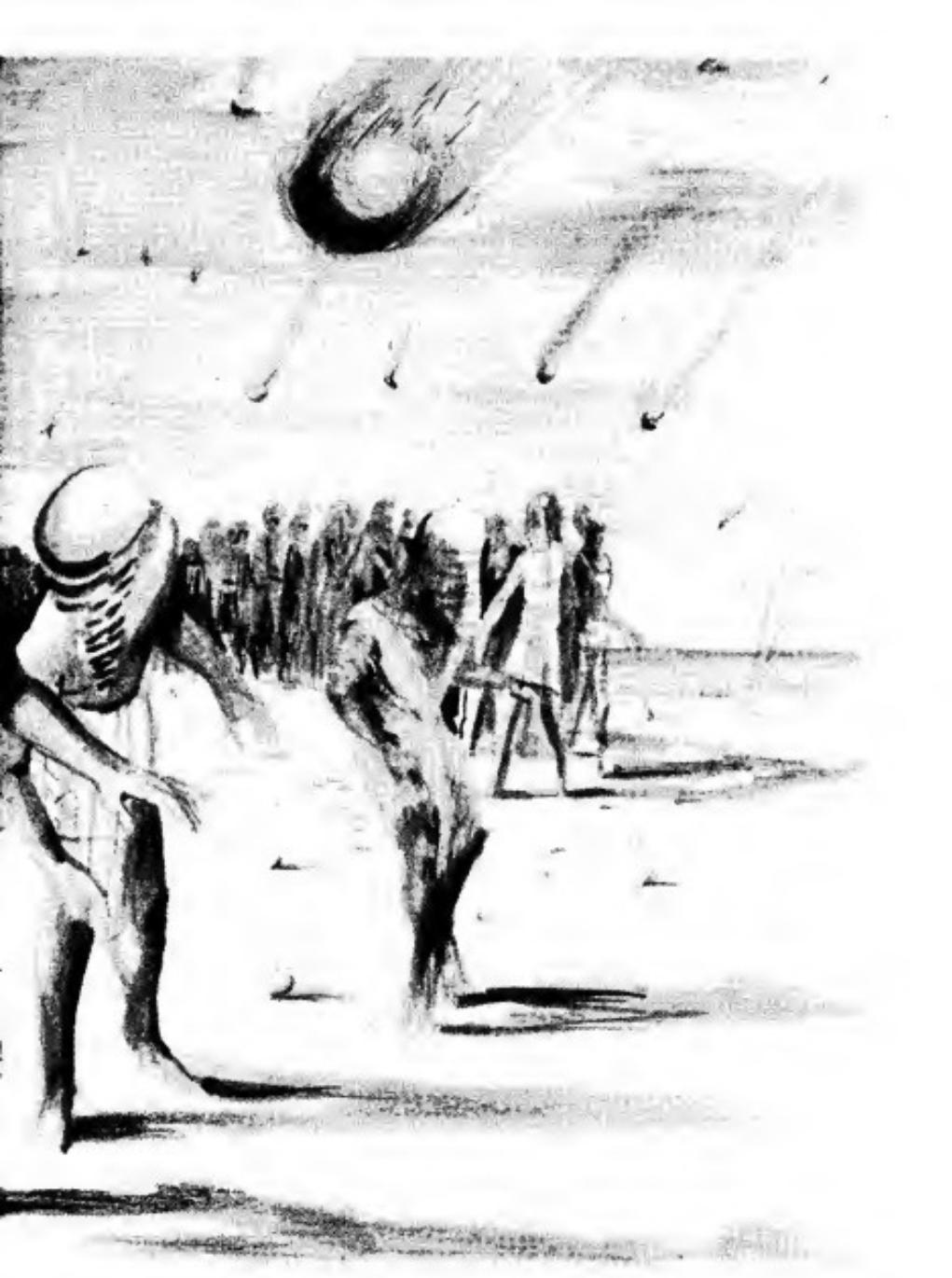
The sun had fallen!

V

HANSON escaped—Hanson and a few more.

The giant *something* that, within itself, floated the flaming sun like a fly trapped in amber, crashed to the ground on the horizon, scant miles away. The heat was searing. Hanson felt as if he were being baked alive. He could feel the blood in his veins bubble and surge as it evaporated into steam. He could see giant blisters forming and bursting on his forearm stretched out on the rock. He could see the flesh beneath the blisters stirring, healing and blistering again.





In his exposed position, he faced sure death—

If he could be killed at all.

It lasted for only a few moments, but a few moments were enough. Of all that fabulous host of slaves and overseers, only the scant handful who happened to be protected by rock, by magic or by the huddled bodies of their fellows still lived.

When the thundering sound of the falling piece of sky died away, leaving only the vicious, far-off crackle of flames, a few figures crawled and moved. Hanson stood up shakily, staring fearfully at the radiant halo over the hills between him and the horizon.

The thing to do was to get out of there. Never mind the dead or the dying, never mind anything.

He plunged through the desert, under a curious helter-skelter canopy of stars, the world bright around him from the glow on the horizon, the sky black above.

He walked for hours.

He rested briefly, then he walked again.

By and by, the tongues of flame no longer flared in the sky behind him, although the brilliant radiance continued. And Hanson found that, while his body was strong and almost indestructible, it was not utterly unhuman. He was tired.

Curled up in the sand, he slept.

He never knew how long. When

he woke, the sky was as mad and featureless as before—without the sun, with stars and planets spinning in random orbits. There was no night, there was no day.

He woke to a roaring wind that drove cutting sand-knives into him. He forced himself to get up and stagger against it, away from the place where the sun had fallen.

EVEN through the lashing sand, he could see its glow behind him. Now a pillar of something—steam or the vapor of molten, evaporated rocks?—rose above it, like the poisonous mushroom of the old atom-bombs. It was spreading under the phlogiston layer, reflecting the glare. And the heat of it, sucking up the air for hundreds of square miles, made this fearful wind.

He stumbled on. Finally, the sand gave way to tufts of something like crabgrass, then to thin sod, then to knee-high undergrowth.

With the sun gone and the sky in shreds, this world was almost certainly done for. He spared a wry smile for the Sather Karf and the other sorcerers, working their spells against the handicap of impossible conjunctions and unknown signs.

If the sun had been embedded in the shell of "sky" material, why hadn't the sky melted? It had been easy enough to melt in his own

laboratory and, certainly, the sun's heat was far greater than anything his salamanders could produce. He could find no real answer. Perhaps, the sun was moving *through* the shell, solid though it seemed—the sorcerers had said something about its being both liquid and solid. And, perhaps, the motion was fast enough so that no single spot became hot enough to melt. Or, perhaps, the phlogiston dissipated the heat.

The cloud of glowing stuff was spreading. He was many miles, surely, from the pyramid, yet he could see curling filaments of glowing vapor almost overhead. At least, it would mean light and heat for one hemisphere of the world, he thought.

Assuming, that is, that this world was round.

He walked on briskly, abandoning speculation. Ahead was a cluster of lights—a village, perhaps. He headed for it.

THE lights were fluorescents, from a low, shedlike building that was nearly a quarter of a mile long.

Hanson stared at it. The sign over the door read, *Project Five*. Nothing else.

In the half-light from the sky, he saw that the well-kept lawn around the shed was covered with idling human beings in clusters. Most of them wore white coveralls

—a few, simple business suits of the mid-twentieth century.

Hanson looked at the remnants of his Egyptian slave costume and ducked into the shelter of a clump of bushes. He needed something less conspicuous. He tried the abracadabra, rather dubiously. The first try produced a Bikini bathing suit—the second, a swallowtail coat. Eventually, though, he had a suitable outfit—if you didn't object to the parakeet brilliance of his tropical-print sport shirt.

He moved closer to the loungers on the grass, taking his time, carefully paying no particular attention to individuals.

If he had stopped at the fringes of the scattered groups to speak to someone, there might have been questions. Hanson didn't want to answer questions — he wanted questions answered. It seemed that his choice, in the long run, lay between Bork and the Satheri. But, for the moment, he was free of both and, having such freedom, he wanted to be sure of making the right choice.

So he walked casually across the grass, almost to the shed, drifted along its perimeter and sank to the ground with a yawn, next to a small group of men.

They seemed to be reminiscing over old times. ". . . two thirty-eight an hour *with* overtime, and double overtime for the swing shift. Boy, we really had it made!

And every Saturday, without fail, the general would come out from Muroc and tell us we were the heroes of the home front—with overtime pay while we listened to him!"

"Yeah, but what if you wanted to quit? Suppose you didn't like your shift boss or somebody. You went down to get your time, and they handed you your draft notice. No, I liked it better in '46. Not so much pay, but . . ."

Hanson pricked up his ears. The conversation told him more than he needed to know. He stood up and peered through the windows of the shed. There, unattended under powerful banks of fluorescents, stood rows of half-finished aircraft shapes.

Hanson shook his head dazedly. He walked over to a man who lay on the ground, staring at the sky with his hands clasped under the back of his neck. He said, "Beg pardon, but I just got here. What the hell kind of place is this?"

The man looked up at Hanson disinterestedly. "You hit it, bud," he said and turned away.

Hanson persisted. "What's the score?"

The man sat up and made a disgusted noise. "Who knows?" he said aggrievedly. "We're dead. We're dead and we're here and they tell us, 'Make helicopters.' So we make them. So, about the time the first one comes off the

line—boom!—the power fails. No juice—nothing to run the torches, nothing to make the machines go, nothing. So we sit." He spat on the ground.

HANSON kept after him, though the pattern was clear enough. Neither he himself nor Menes had been alone. The sorcerers had brought back engineers of all descriptions—including, it appeared, aeronautical engineers.

The man said, "Maybe they got confused—this shop is the one that made those big cargo copters they called 'Sky Hooks' and, I dunno, maybe they thought they were the real thing. All I know is, I was tack-welding fuel tanks for five solid weeks when the power went off. I knew it was going to happen—they had the craziest damn generating plant you ever saw, the boilers sizzling and the safety-valves popping with no fire in the box! Just one little old man sitting in a corner, practicing the Masonic grip or something over a smudge-pot."

Hanson frowned. "If there's no power, what are those lights?"

"Witch-lights," the man explained. "They came on when the power failed. They—hey, what's that?"

He stared up. Hanson had seen it too—something whizzing overhead at jet-plane speed. Hanson said, "A piece of the sky, maybe?"

The man glared at him. "Falling sidewise? Not that that would be any crazier than anything else that's happened around here. I tell you, pal, I don't like this place. It wasn't so bad when I first got here. But it's been going to pieces ever since. Second day I was here, I went to the water-cooler for a drink and bat's blood came out. Ever drink bat's blood, Mac? Don't do it.

"And that's not the half of it. After the power went off, they give me something they called a salamander to weld with. Man, that's an *experience*. I was never gladder of anything in my life when the machine shops ran out of components and—hey, there it is again!"

The something whizzed by again, in the other direction, but lower and slower. It circled around the shed and swooped back.

It looked like—Hallowe'en. It was a woman on a broomstick, flying erratically. She turned over like an Eskimo in his kayak, righted herself, dipped to the earth, then straightened out in a flat glide.

She came to a three-point landing a couple of yards away.

It was Nema, her face masklike, her eyes tortured. She was staring searchingly at every man.

"*Nema!*" Hanson cried.

She spun to face him and her face went alternately red and gray. She took a tottering step toward

him. She said clearly, "*Illusion!*" —and slumped to the ground in a faint.

HANSON got her away from there somehow, half-carried her through the curious crowd, out to the rim of the wild growth. There, well away from the helicopter plant, he set her on her feet and tried to take her in his arms. It was not premeditated, but his lips reached for hers—as did hers for his.

There was, maddeningly, an invisible barrier between them. Nema uttered a despairing little cry and said, "You forgot—I'm a registered and certified virgin."

With a growl of frustration, Hanson let his arms fall away from her. He said, "They sure don't take chances with their vestals in *this* world."

She shook her head sorrowfully. "Dave," she said tenderly. "Dave Hanson! Then it was mere illusion."

"What was mere illusion?" he asked.

Nema grew angry. "My brother—and the anestha-knife!" she exclaimed. "I *knew* you were dead. From the anestha-knife, there is no revival. But you *are* alive and so—it was illusion. Dave Hanson, I thank the gods for your life! And, if it hadn't been for my own spell—" her smile was intimate, tender—"if it hadn't driven me to

follow you everywhere, even through the jaws of death, I might never have known it was illusion."

She shuddered, added, "It was terrible—more terrible than you know. Everything's wrong now. I could hardly control my broom. More than once, I almost crashed. Nothing works now for the sorcerers, Dave—the world is close to its end."

Hanson shrugged. "Let it end," he said wearily. He tried again to embrace her—but to no avail. "*Let it end!*" he exclaimed furiously.

She shook her head, said, "No, darling, it is well we can't forget that I am a registered and certified virgin. For, if the Satheri ever needed pure blood, they—"

"The hell with the Satheri!" Hanson cried. "You said yourself that the world is coming to an end. What's the difference if—good God!"

He stared over her shoulder. The lights in the plane factory had flared whitely and gone out. In the half-light from the sky, he saw that the plant was gone. There was only barren earth, with a tiny, limp sapling in the middle of empty acres.

"What happened?"

SHE glanced briefly and sighed. "Those poor men! It's happening all over, Dave, not just here. The plane plant was magicked into a plane plant—that is, by the law of identities, the sapling of the

plane tree was transformed into a factory for producing aircraft. And the spell has failed. All our spells are failing, now."

"But those men!" Hanson exploded. "I was just *talking* to one of them!"

"He'll talk no more, poor zombie. Back to the grave—the spell is over."

Sanson stared and swallowed. "I see," he managed. "Mandrake men, like me."

"Oh, no, Dave Hanson. Mandrake root is scarce and expensive—only the leaders are mandrakes. The others are—merely revived corpses. They would not have lasted long anyhow. Truly, they were lucky. They lived for weeks. The Toltec project vanished a month ago, Isambard Brunel's sky-schooner turned into a pumpkin, some of the others have fared even worse. The world has gone mad—even magic isn't trustworthy any more."

Hanson said, "Not my magic, Nema. I conjured up these clothes just a little while ago."

She looked at him, frowning, "I don't know, Dave Hanson," she said hopelessly. "All I know is even the oldest, surest spells are failing us now. The Rainbow Bridge across The River—it faded away like mist before my eyes while I flew over it, an hour ago. Perhaps Bork was right—perhaps the egg must hatch."

She sat down and began silently to weep.

Hanson bent to comfort her. But, just then, there was a thump behind them and something like pounding hoofbeats. They both looked up in surprise.

It was a roc in its long landing-run, heading straight for them.

The Sather Karf got off, one hand held in the air in a throwing position, twelve dead-eyed mandrakes behind him, each carrying a steel-lashed whip.

"I greet Dave Hanson," the Sather said formally. "I thank the Virgin Nema for—however witlessly—leading us to him!"

VI

THERE was no conversation on the way back. The great roc's hard-drumming wings created a constant sound like thunder, and the air whipped past them viciously, threatening to dislodge them. They passed closer to the sun now. It was sinking slowly into the earth, lying in a great fused hole. For miles around, smaller drops of the 15,000-foot sun had spattered and were etching deeper holes in the pitted landscape.

The rest of the trip was across desolate country—country scoured by winds—gloomy with the half-light from the angry, glaring clouds above. Half a mile of the shell cracked off above them. The roc

squawked harshly in fright, but it missed them. They ducked low, a few miles further on, to escape the fringe of clouds that seemed to be sucked downward by the varying winds.

There they passed above a village. The sights below were out of a ghoul's bacchanalia. As the roc swept over them, the villagers dropped their frenzied pursuits and ran for weapons. A cloud of arrows hissed upward, but too late. However, it indicated that the populace was blaming its troubles on the magicians.

When they finally reached the great capital city, things were somewhat more orderly. Here, the sun was far away, the light dimmer. The semi-darkness seemed to have driven people off the streets. There was no sign of electric power. Apparently, the spell that maintained it was no longer operating.

But many of the buildings that had sparkled so bravely before were wrecks. Only the older edifices appeared still sound, probably because they were built out of normal stone and metal, by older techniques. One of the largest of these had been turned into a hospital of sorts, and the whole square in front of it was crammed with people. More than half of them were already dead, with the squat mandrakes carrying off the bodies to a great pyre already burning

nearby. Plague and pestilence appeared to be growing completely out of hand.

They landed at the construction camp. One section of it had been shredded by the lash of wind caused by the fall of a huge piece of sky, studded with a few stars, that lay nearby. But most of it was unharmed. Around the edges, basilisks were posted on top of stones, chained to face outward so that they could prevent any invasion by the mob.

He caught one glimpse of a crowd at the other end of the park. They had a fire going and were apparently preparing to cook one of the mandrakes, while others swarmed up to fight for the prize. Food, it seemed, was no longer being made. But it was being eaten.

AT the camp, a new building—made of trees and rocks without magic, obviously—had been thrown up to one side. It was here that a few of the priests had taken shelter. Sersa Garm and Ser Perth waited there, though Dave had thought that the latter must have died under the sun's descent.

The mandrakes prodded them into the new building, then left at a wave of the Sather Karf's hand. The old man turned toward Dave, his eyes cold and flinty. He lifted his hand, dropped it, then sighed, sinking slowly to a seat. His face seemed to collapse, with the iron

running out of it, to leave a beaten, sick old man. His voice was pleading, rather than angry. "Fix the sky, Dave Hanson," he said.

There was an angry mutter from another priest in the background but the Sather Karf shook his head slowly, still facing Dave. "No—what good to threaten return to the mandrake swamp when another day or week will see the end of everything? What good to demand your reasons when time is so short? Fix the sky, and any reward we can offer is yours."

"We have few powers, now that astrology is ruined. But repair the sky, and the near-immortality we have given you will remain. We'll give you rubies and emeralds to buy an empire. Take Nema for your own, if you want her. If you're angry, I'll tell you my secret name and that of every priest here. Do what you will to us then. *But fix the sky!*"

It shook him. He'd been prepared to assuage their anger with a story of studying Menes' work, but he had no defense against this. Slowly, Dave nodded. It was hopeless, impossible. He could do nothing. Before the picture of the world dying and the decay of the old man's pride, even his own imminent death with the dying world seemed unimportant. He might at least give them something to hope for until the end came.

"Could I ever be returned to my

own world? As I was before my accident?"

The men looked around and Ser Perth answered sadly, "No."

"Maybe," Dave said slowly, after a long thoughtful silence, "if all of the men you brought here to work on the problem were to pool their knowledge, we might find an answer. Can you bring them together for a council?"

Ser Perth shook his head. The fat was fading from his face, and his mustache was untrimmed. "Some are mandrakes again," he said. "Two escaped. Menes is dead. You're all we have left. And we can't even supply labor beyond the mandrake men here, except for our own ranks of the priesthood. The others will never obey. We have no food to give them."

"You're our only hope," Sersa Garm seconded.

DAVE stared at them, then around at the bric-a-brac of machinery they had assembled for him. He opened his mouth and his own laughter mocked him. Dave Hanson, world-saver!

"You have the right name but the wrong man, Sather Karf," he said bitterly. "I couldn't even build a doghouse. You wanted my uncle, but you got me, because the name his friends used for him was given to me—and cut on that monument. Even he'd have been helpless. I wasn't even an engineer—just a

computer repairman and operator."

He regretted ruining their hopes even as he said it. But he saw no change in their expressions. The old face of the Sather Karf seemed merely to stiffen, becoming more thoughtful.

"Your name was on the monument and we drew you back by its use. Therefore, under the laws of the soundest magic, it *is* you to whom nothing is impossible. Perhaps we were wrong in trying to force you to be an engineer. But, nonetheless, it is *you* who must fix the sky. What is this computer you mention? Some magic greater than engineering?"

Dave shook his head. "Just a tool used by engineers and others. It's a little hard to explain. And it couldn't help."

A touch of shrewdness came into the Sather Karf's eyes. "At least humor me that much! I want to know."

Nema's hand rested on his pleadingly. Dave shrugged. He groped for an answer, letting his mind flicker from the old-time tide-predictor to the modern electronic gadgets. "An analogue computer is a machine that—that sets up conditions mathematically similar to the conditions of some problem and then lets all the conditions operate, drawing a graph—a prediction—of how the real thing will work.

"If the tides change with the position of heavenly bodies, then we can build cams that have shapes like the effect-changes, and gear them together in the right order. A cam for each factor, shaped like the periodic rise and fall of that factor—geared to let the various factors operate at the same relative rate. And we can run off a graph of the tides for the next fifty years. Oh, hell—it's a lot more complicated than that. A computer takes the basic facts and draws a graph—an analogue—of the results. Only we use electronic ones now . . ."

"I understand," the Sather Karf said. Dave doubted it, but he was happy to swim out of the fix into which he'd been getting himself with his muddled pictures. The old man pondered and nodded. "A fine scientific instrument obeying natural law. We have applied the same methods, though less elaborately. The basic magical principle of similarity."

Dave snorted. And then he stopped, frowning. In a way, it was exactly that. Perhaps, there was some relation between science and magic—the natural laws of the two worlds he knew. Computers set up similar situations with the idea that the results would apply to the original. Magic used a bit of a man, or an image of him, to control all of the original. Or was that getting contagion mixed in?

He'd heard about magic being based mostly on the two principles.

"So the fault is ours," the Sather Karf said finally. "We should have brought a computer from your world. Then you could have simulated our sky as it should be within your computer and forced it to be repaired long ago. But there's no time for regret now. Build us a computer!"

"But . . ."

SUDDEN rage burned on the old man's face and he rose to his feet. His arm jerked back and snapped forward. Nothing happened. He grimaced. "Dave Hanson," he said sharply, "by the unfailing power of your name, which is all of you, I hold your name in my mind, your throat in my hands . . ."

His old hands squeezed suddenly and Dave felt a vise clamp around his throat. He tried to break free, but there was nothing there. The old man mumbled and the vise was gone, but something clawed at Dave's liver. Something else rasped across his sciatic nerve. His kidneys seemed to be wrenched out of him . . .

"You will build your computer," the Sather Karf said. "And you will save our world!"

Dave staggered back, panting from the shock of the pain. He'd had enough agony to last for the

full length of his potential life, but he hadn't learned to bear it any more easily. "All right," he gasped finally. "I'll build your damned computer. And, when I'm finished, I'll wait for *your* name!"

"You'll have it," the Sather Karf promised. "Also whatever rewards our failing art can give. Ser Perth! Bring food for Dave Hanson."

Ser Perth shook his head sadly. "There is none—none at all. We hope that the remaining planets will find a favorable conjunction, but . . ."

Dave studied his helpers with more bitterness. "Oh, hell!" he said at last. "Abracadabra!"

Either luck was with him or his skill was improving. A full side of beef materialized as he snapped his fingers, almost breaking his arm before his hand snapped out of the way. The others swarmed toward it hungrily. And, for a second, Dave felt more confidence at their expressions. Perhaps, he was becoming a magician himself, with a new art that could do the impossible.

The Sather Karf smiled approvingly. "The theory of resonance. Unreliable, but you show promise, Dave Hanson."

"You know it?" Dave had gathered that it was outside their procedures.

"We *knew* it. But, when more advanced techniques took over, most of us forgot it. The syllable resonates in a sound pattern with

your world, to which you also still resonate. It won't work for you here, nor for us in your world. We have a different syllable, of course." The Sather Karf considered it. "But, if you can control it and bring in one of your computers—a part at a time . . ."

Sixteen tries later, Dave found he couldn't. He'd tried for transistors. He got a pile of old-style 201-A triodes, a crystal vase, a transit and a bunch of assorted junk. He gave up at last, when he finally realized there was no electricity with which to power a machine, even if he could build one out of its basic parts—which he couldn't, within the time left.

Overhead, the sky shattered with a roar and another piece fell, tearing into the city. Ser Perth stared upward in horror.

"*Mars!*" he croaked. "*Mars* has fallen! Now there can be no conjunction—ever!"

VII

IN the hours that followed, Dave's original intentions bounced a dozen times between ridiculous hope and a combination of desperate need to keep himself occupied with the obligation to give his hosts what comfort he could. Perhaps, it was the horror that he remembered lay beyond the camp, or, perhaps, the sight of the rotted, pitted sky itself. But ultimately,

hope and a stumbling faith won out.

Somewhere, in the combination of what science couldn't be avoided by any technician on his world, along with the magic of this world, there might be an answer—or a means to stay doom long enough for an answer to be found.

The very bulk of the factors he had to contend with was the most frightening feature of the problems. There were the seven planets and the sun. And, with them, were some three thousand stars. All had to be ordered in their courses. But, above all else, the sky had to be complete.

He tried to think out the simplest possible similarity-computer machine. Electronics was worthless. In his head, he worked out the rough idea of a machine similar to the tide machine, then gave it up. His hosts couldn't build it—nor was there time.

Nor could he depend on the help he would have had from them in normal times. He couldn't get materials through magic. Only the basic, most elementary magic functioned at all, since the rest was keyed too closely to astrology. And astrology was gone with the sky. Names were potent in command—resonance might work within its limited, uncontrollable nature—and the broadest powers of similarity remained. He knew too little of contagion to be sure of that

branch of the art, but most of it, he feared, was worked by some association with the nature of zodiacal houses and the course of the planets.

He found himself thinking in circles of worry, and desperately pulled himself back to the need to simplify. A computer had to be built to handle the most flexible conditions. But this one could be made to handle only one situation—it had to duplicate the courses of the planets and simulate the behavior of the sky. It wasn't necessary to equip it to handle any theoretical set of courses, only the given ones.

And that, of course, meant a model—the one thing which *is*, functionally, the perfect representation.

IT brought him sharply back to magic. Make a doll like a man, stick pins in it—and the man dies. Make a model of the universe within the sky, surround it with a shell—and any changes in it should affect the real universe here.

A model with three thousand stars in their orbits!

He had been doodling while he thought, making symbols that meant nothing, but which convinced the Sather Karf and the others that he was working on the needed scientific spell. Sersa Garm moved nearer, studying his marks. "Three thousand—that is for the

stars?" he asked doubtfully. "It's wrong. There are but two thousand seven hundred eighty-one—or there were."

"And, I suppose, you've got the exact orbits of every one?" Dave asked.

"Naturally. They are fixed stars, which move with the sky. Otherwise, why call them fixed stars? Only the sun and planets move through the sky, as the sky moves over the world itself."

Dave grunted. That meant only one control for all of them—or, better still, for the sky itself. They could be stuck on. Seven planets and the sun—all in a series of complex orbits—was a rugged problem, but a feasible one.

He began to sketch it out roughly. A glass sphere with dots for the stars. The planets could be bits of something with iron in them, held and moved about by magnets outside the bowl—there were magnets in some of the equipment they had brought him. Men could control them, if necessary. The sun could be a disc, secured in the same way. But the business of holding the earth in the center would be tricky.

Sersa Garm came over, staring at the sketch. He grunted in disgust. "Why waste time drawing orbits! If you want a model, we have the finest orrery in existence. We brought it from the great crypt for your use here, before you were

abducted. I'll get it for you!"

He dashed off, calling two of the mandrake men after him. In a few minutes, they staggered back under a bulky affair in a clear plastic box.

It was a beautiful job. Probably, the material was all of precious gems and costly crystals, hand executed to add to its value in a world where magic was cheap. The dome was nearly eight feet in diameter, running on a set of jeweled gears that were powered by weights, like an old-fashioned clock. The planets were suspended just outside the dome from a series of tracks. And the world, depicted in colors, hung from a slender rod that went through the glass, suspended precisely in the center of the sphere.

DAVE bent forward to examine the rod but could see no hole in the crystal or glass of the shell.

"A bit of the sky." Sersa Garm confirmed his suspicions. "It fell nearly fifty years ago. Our first warning, though no one knew it then. It slips through the crystal with ease and is—or was—our most precious possession."

It was beautiful—and completely damning to all of Dave's hopes. No model he could make could equal it—but, in spite of it and all its precise depiction of the orbits, the sky was still falling!

The Sather Karf had sat back,

apparently watching nothing. But as Dave's face changed expression, the old man hobbled over. The weight of all his centuries lay on him, yet a curious toughness showed through it. "What is wrong with the orrery?" he asked.

"Nothing—nothing at all, damn it!" Dave told him. "You wanted a computer—and you've got it. You can feed in data as to the year, turn the cranks and find exactly how the planets will run. What more could any computer do? But it doesn't influence the sky!"

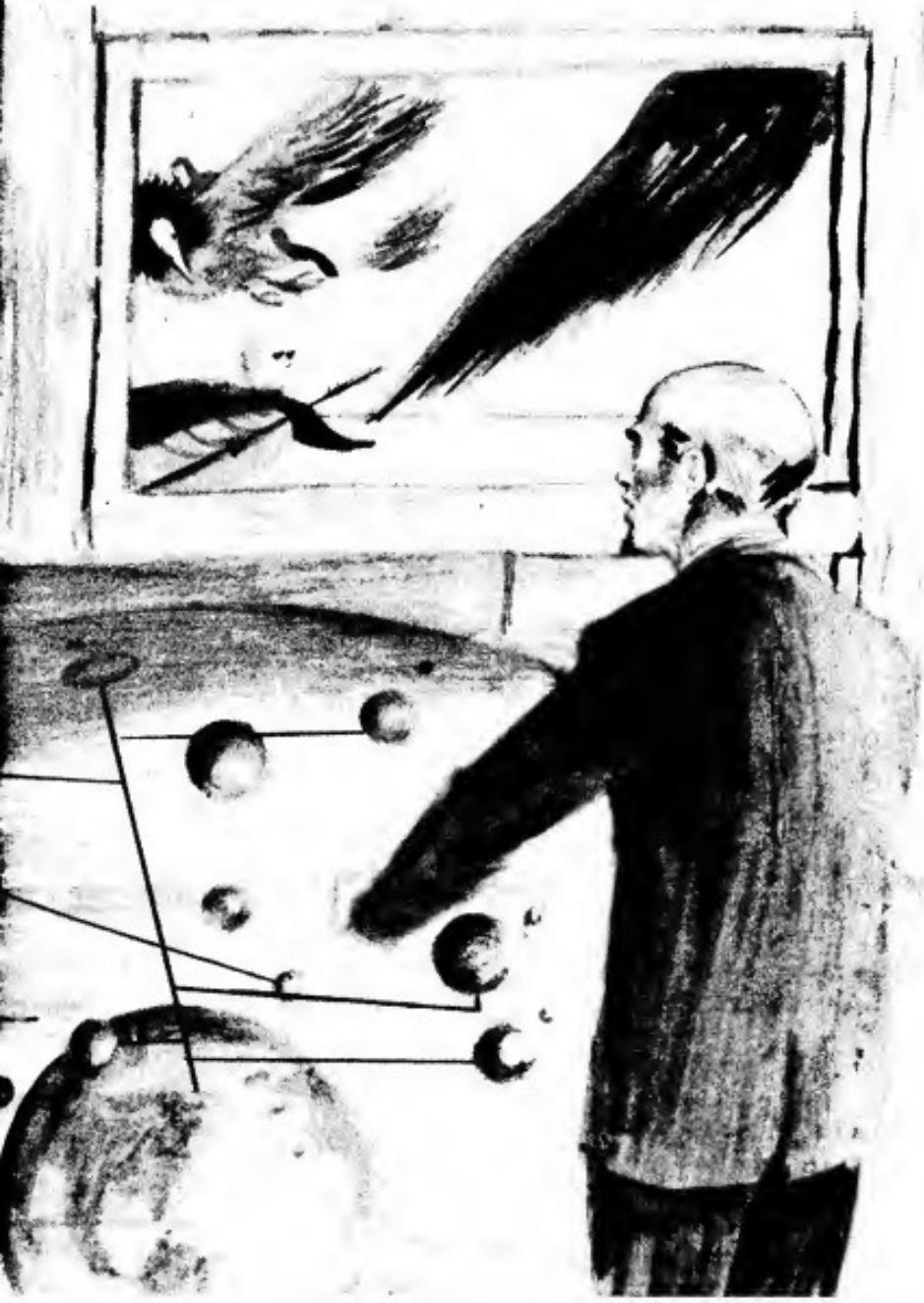
"It was never meant to," the old man said, surprise in his voice. "Such power . . ."

Then he stopped, staring at Dave. "Yet—the prophecy on the monument *was* right. You have unlocked the impossible! But you don't know enough. Dave Hanson, do you know nothing of the laws of similarity? Or of any magic? Is that crystal similar to the sky? A part may act as a whole—or a part, properly manipulated, may influence the whole. If I have a hair from your head, I can make a model of you with power over you. But not with hair from a pig!"

"Then if we substituted bits of the real thing for these bits . . ."

"It might work!" Sersa Garm's face almost lost its gloomy fears. "I've seen you melt the sky material—and to blow a sphere is a small job to any magician who has studied his glass blowing in al-





NO MORE STARS

chemistry. We have a few of the stars in the pieces that fell and enough mandrakes to break and polish one into the needed pieces."

"And bits of the sun, if we can bring one back. But what about the planets?"

"That closely associated with a thing achieves the nature of the thing," the Sather Karf intoned. "I can resonate a bit of sun here with a few trials, Dave Hanson. We can make the planets from scraps of the colors, metals, jewels and other symbols they control."

"What about some iron in them—so we can move them through the sky-stuff by hanging magnets on the tracks?" Dave asked. "Or does cold iron ruin things?"

THE Sather Karf snorted his disgust. "Superstitious ignorance! Why should it? But there remains one power greater than all to make this work. It must be named with the true and sacred name of the universe."

"Which, I suppose, nobody can pronounce?" Dave guessed sickly, remembering the legends of the tetragrammaton.

The old man drew himself up abruptly, staring at the computer-man with the pride of his world on his face. "No one save the Sather Karf can know it!" he answered, and there was the ring of generations of authority in his voice. Then he turned and hobbled toward

Sersa Garm, and began giving orders to the forty-odd members of the priesthood who had found sanctuary in the camp.

The simulacra of the planets were put together and the old man managed, eventually, to transport a bit of the sun big enough to set one end of the camp into a blazing uproar. They were lucky in this. It had struck a rock, and spattered into smaller pieces of various sizes, of which one was about right.

Nema and two lesser priests molded a globe of clay and baked it carefully near one of the sun-fragments of the hot stuff to heat the crude oven he had made. The salamanders had vanished from the blowtorch.

Above them, the sky continued to break apart, its pieces falling almost continually. And the Sather Karf watched it with a worried expression around his eyes.

"So long as any of it remains, we may succeed," he told Dave. "But, should it all fall, even you cannot achieve such an impossibility as forcing similarity on nothing!"

"Yeah," Dave agreed. He had his own worries. "And how about suspending the globe from nothing to keep it in the center there?"

"Let it sink to the bottom," the old man said. "It will rise of its own accord—provided that all else goes well."

It took more time to mount the

shell and to place the star-similacra in place, where they seemed to sink into the invisible material and rest, just as they had in the real sky. The planets were suspended by the magnets that coupled to the tracks, then the sun was mounted. Finally, the globe was shoved through the shell, before completing the placing of the stars.

Dave made sure the weights were fully raised. From now on, someone would probably have the responsibility of keeping this strange machine wound up, unless they could devise a motor that was foolproof. Then he stepped back to let the Sather Karf set the orrery to the correct adjustment for their current time.

The old man, chanting sibilantly under his breath, set the controls. He seemed to take forever. Then he looked up, frowning.

"It doesn't move freely, Dave Hanson," he said ominously. "If you have wrecked it . . ."

Hanson pushed him aside and examined the orrery through a diamond lens. Some of the gears were loose in their jeweled bearings. Simple enough to fix . . .

If one had tools.

And if one had time.

THE Sather Karf said, "You have ten minutes, perhaps." He was staring calmly into a bead of quicksilver, dancing across his cupped palm.

"Yeah," said Hanson. He didn't even look up. The tools were makeshift, the job tricky—but it was being done. Under his fingers, the delicate structure was almost as tight as on that ancient day when it was first made. His hands were steady, though there were thunder and flashes of light all about him, and once the ground heaved.

There was a shout. The Sather Karf cried out angrily in an unfamiliar tongue. His hand made a throwing gesture and he moaned his disappointment as nothing happened. Hanson turned carefully, gently, not disturbing the orrery—and saw invasion!

Rocs were landing, a score of them. Men were springing from their backs.

"Bork!" bellowed the old Sather Karf. He shouted in Hanson's ear, "Go on! We'll handle Bork!"

The masked men from the rocs, their dull colored robes fluttering behind them, carried the long anestha-knives. Hanson almost took a step to join the defense, but he dared not leave the analogue. He glanced at the sky—there were more holes than sky now, and in the holes he saw . . .

Shadows. Quickly he looked away, before he could see more. He felt cold sweat at the nape of his neck, and it was not fear of Bork that put it there.

"The orrery!" Bork was bellow-

ing as he ran. "Smash it! *Destroy it—the egg must hatch!*"

The men behind him echoed his yell and the Satheri shrieked back at them. And then, the old Sather Karf was dashing toward the invaders, catching up his staff on which a drop of the sun-stuff glowed, to make a beacon that others might follow in the insane half-light. His voice rose in command and over his shoulder the old man cried, "Fix the orrery, Dave Hanson! Two minutes now—no more!"

Cursing, Hanson bent back to the gears. There was thunder again from the falling sky and near-darkness. The half-light from the reflecting clouds dimmed—the ground shook again. He caught up a bit of the sun-stuff from where it lay with the discarded shards of silver and sky-stuff, pierced it with the sharp point of an awl, held it close to the orrery, lighting his last bit of work. It burned his fingers, burned his face—but he held it.

Two minutes—one was gone, the other going . . .

The Sather Karf was back, though the battle raged unchecked. "*The Name!*" he shouted. "Are you ready?"

Hanson slapped the cover back on the orrery. "Now!" he cried.

The old man's fingers spun and a word rang out. It was a deafening, awesome word . . .

The universe stilled, listening.

VIII

THE clay globe lifted abruptly to the center position. There were a wrench and twist. Over the horizon, a great burning disc rose and leaped toward the heavens as the sun went back to its place in the sky. The big bits of sky-stuff around also jerked upward, revealing themselves by the wind they whipped up. Some of the smaller ones seemed to do the same, though the scrap under Dave's hand remained, as did the blazing bit of sun-stuff at the end of the camp.

Through the diamond lens, the clay globe had changed. It now floated freely inside the transparent shell—and there were clouds above it, the green of forests, the gray-blue of oceans. He found the city. And, faintly, in the heart of it, a tiny blaze, to mark the end of the camp where the sun-stuff remained!

When, at last, he looked up, all was serene. Sunlight shone down from the sky and, from under the roof, the shell was visible—the shell that was the gaudy, impossible sky of this world. It was complete, with its great cracks smoothing out while he watched.

The battle had stopped. Half the priests were lying motionless, the others had clustered together, close to the building where Dave and the Sather Karf stood. The Sons

of the Egg seemed to have suffered less, but to have been more shocked by the rising of the sun and the restoration of the sky.

Then Bork's voice rang out sharply. "It isn't stable yet! *Destroy the machine!*"

He leaped forward, brandishing his knife, while the other Sons of the Egg followed. The priests closed ranks, falling back to make a stand under the jutting edge of the roof, where they could protect the machine. But they were hopelessly outnumbered.

SOMETHING seemed to bite into Dave's mind. There was no time to think, only to act. He snapped the lens to his eye and his fingers caught at the drop of sun-stuff on the awl. It sank through the shell of the model, just as he located the spot where the glow marked the camp in which they were. His thumb and finger moved downward, delicately, with all the skill of practice at working with nearly invisible fine wires on delicate repair jobs.

Then he jerked his eyes away from the model and looked out. Something glaring and hot was suspended in the air, two miles away! He moved his hand carefully, steadyng it on one of the planet tracks. The glowing fire in the air moved another mile closer. And now, around it, he could see a monstrous fingertip and some-

thing that might have been miles of thumbnail.

The priests leaped back under the roof. The Sons of the Egg screamed and tried to run for shelter. But now, jerking horribly, the monstrous thing moved again. For part of a second, it hovered over the open camp. Then it was gone.

Dave pulled his hand all the way out through the shell of the model, throwing the sun-stuff away with a flick of his wrist. His hand ached with the impossible task of steadiness he had set it, and his finger and thumb burned and smoked. But the wound was already healing.

In the exposed section of the camp, the Sons of the Egg were charred corpses.

Bork turned back, his face sick with fear. And then it settled into resignation, as the big man threw down his knife and moved forward toward Dave. His clothes were charred slightly, but he had obviously made it to the shelter in time.

"You win, Dave Hanson," he said. "You've apparently given this egg a will of its own. What do you want of me now?"

Dave's eyes had located Nema, as she forced her way through the crowd. He grabbed Bork's arm and pulled the big man along with him, heading toward the girl.

"Peace," he said. "And some place where we can see if magic

works well enough to provide a decent meal."

THREE days can work magic—in a world where magic is worked.

There was food again for all. There were homes. The strange commerce and industry of the world went along its incredible way. Those who had survived the cataclysm, and those who had died but had been called back, showed no scars.

Some were missing. Those who had—hatched—were gone past recall. It was a subject not discussed. Even the Sather Karf sometimes wore a weary, a questioning—almost a fearful look.

Bork still lived—because of Hanson. The Sather Karf looked at him hungrily sometimes—but he lived.

Bork had said, "You win, Hanson. The egg will not hatch." He brooded somberly for a moment, then, surprisingly, grinned. "I can't honestly say," he admitted, "that I am altogether sorry to be alive. Perhaps, I'll regret it later but—" he stretched—"life isn't bad."

Hanson grinned back. Bork was already the closest he had to a normal human friend. The Satheri were—strange, though he knew that their word was inviolate, that he had nothing to fear from them any more. Bork was understandable. And, besides, he was Nema's brother.

Hanson moved closer to Nema, who was beside him on the soft, downfilled ottoman. She snuggled as closely against his arm as her barrier permitted, admiring him with her eyes.

But old habits were hard to break. She moved away nervously. "Don't, Dave Hanson," she said quickly. "Don't forget that I'm a registered and—"

"That," Hanson assured her, "is about over." Bork chuckled.

From the doorway behind them, the voice of the Sather Karf said softly, "I've been looking for you, Dave Hanson."

Bork frowned, still not quite certain of his status with the Satheri. The priests had yammered and demanded, and Hanson had thought for a while that they would take Bork in spite of him. But the Sather didn't even look at him.

Nema got up quickly. "Come on, Bork," she said, "let's leave Dave Hanson with the Sather."

"Wait a minute." Hanson pulled her back. "You might as well stay. What is it, Sather Karf?"

The Sather said, "Your reward." His ancient face was white.

Hanson nodded. "Fine. Go ahead."

The Sather's eyes, for a moment, were incandescent. "You want me to tell you *my secret name* before these?" He lashed a long finger at Bork.

"Sure," said Hanson pleasantly.

THE Sather Karf seemed to grow inches taller. Bright anger flamed in his face.

Then he subsided. "It is your right, Dave Hanson," he said almost in a whisper. "Claim your reward. You wish, item first, my secret name. Item second, to retain what we have given you—strength, healing, appearance. Are there more?"

Hanson thought for a moment. "I guess that's enough," he said. "The only thing is . . ."

He glanced thoughtfully at Nema, then back to the old man. He said in a conversational tone, "I'll make a deal with you, Sather Karf. Those things are, perhaps, not what I want at all."

"What then?"

Hanson said, "Tell me something, Sather Karf. With your secret name, I would always be your master, is that correct?"

"If you had the wit to use it."

"Um. Well, I think I have. I think, for instance, I could manage to get my hands on you with it, no matter where either of us might be. The only thing is," Hanson said meditatively, "I might not know when I wanted to get in touch with you. For instance, I should be very angry if you did anything to Bork in my absence, or to Nema for siding with me. But I might not know it was happening."

"That is true," said the Sather Karf unwillingly.

Hanson nodded. "You see? So the gift of your secret name wouldn't do me much good. As for the strength, health and appearance and so on—well, I already have those things."

The Sather said carefully, "Then, what *are* you asking?"

"Oh, I don't know," Hanson said vaguely. "I have a job here, which I kind of like—and you really ought to have someone around to keep that orrery up, you know; the sapphires in the bearings aren't good for more than a couple of hundred thousand years . . . if that. I expect I could be very useful to you as a maintenance man." He glanced at Nema. Her eyes were a spectrum of hope and fear.

Abruptly he grinned. "Sather Karf," he said, "keep your secret name. I think I'll stand pat on what I've got. The only thing is, instead of your secret name, I want something from you that's somewhat more valuable to me."

The Sather said, "More valuable than my *name*?" There was shock in his eyes.

"Yes, indeed," said Hanson easily, taking Nema's hand. "A simple matter of transmutation, Sather. I want you to transform this certified and registered virgin into a certified and registered wife."

Barley Satterfull



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disassembly line

The fiends! They cut off

her nose to splice her faith!

By THEODORE R. COGSWELL

“**T**HIS is our Mr. Higgens,” said the blond young desk clerk. “He’ll be in charge of taking you apart. And this is Mr. Montgomery, the best reassembler on our staff.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am,” said Mr. Montgomery.

“Likewise,” said Mr. Higgens. Aunt Hester gave a nod of cold acknowledgment of the introduction, and turned back to the reception desk. Higgens and Montgomery eyed her stiff back for a

moment, looked at each other, and quietly left.

“One second, please,” said the desk clerk, lifting a small stack of cards out of a file drawer.

“As I was saying,” said Aunt Hester, “disorder I can tolerate, but not wilful mistreatment.” She pointed toward two dejected looking plants that squatted in tubs on each side of the main entrance to the lobby. “Those rubber plants haven’t been dusted in months! How do you expect the poor things

Illustrated by ASHMAN

to be happy with their pores all clogged up with filth and grime?"

There was no answer. She rapped on top of the counter with her umbrella. "Young man! I was speaking to you!"

The young man looked up briefly from the pile of cards he was checking.

"One minute, Miss Winston," he said. "As soon as I find your record, I'll be able to take care of you."

AUNT HESTER sniffed through her enormous, beaklike nose and surveyed the general untidiness of the lobby with distaste. She didn't know where she was yet, but it certainly wasn't the sort of hostelry she would have selected for a home away from home, if she'd had any voice in the matter; during her annual trips to Boston she always stayed at the Aldrich, a quiet and dignified family hotel that had been patronized by the Winstons for four generations. But this wasn't Boston—and she hadn't had any choice about coming here. She'd just—come.

"Ah, here we are." The young man behind the counter pulled out a card and scanned it quickly. "Sorry to have kept you waiting, but we're terribly short-handed here. I have to act as desk clerk, registrar, and office manager at the same time."

Aunt Hester didn't look at all

sympathetic. "That's no excuse for neglecting the rubber plants," she said severely. "While a plant is not human, it is still part of the divine pattern. The Good Lord put us on Earth to look after those who are unable to look after themselves." She spoke with the brusque assurance of one who had done considerable looking after, and intended to do a lot more.

"But you aren't on . . ." The clerk suddenly caught himself and looked back at her card. "You'll be in 327. It's an inside room, but it's all we have open at the moment. If you'll wait just a few minutes until I can bring your records up to date, I'll take you up there."

"I'll find my own way, thank you," sniffed Aunt Hester.

"I'm afraid you'll have to walk up, then," said the clerk. "I run the elevator too."

It wasn't a very nice room. There was only one window, and it was jammed open. Sulphur fumes from a small crater at the bottom of the air shaft curled yellow streamers into the room, making a tawny haze through which the single light bulb hanging from the ceiling shone dimly. Aunt Hester coughed gently and waved a lace-trimmed handkerchief ineffectually in front of her face.

"Something," she said to herself, "is going to have to be done about this."

Her face took on an expression of grim satisfaction as she began planning—she loved to manage things and lives, especially other people's. She was considering organizing a committee of guests to call upon the manager when there was a diffident knock upon her door.

"Who's there?" she called.

MR. Montgomery and Mr. Higgens entered. Their shoulders were so broad that they had to turn sideways to get through the doorway.

"Time for your first lesson, ma'am," said Mr. Montgomery.

"Lesson?" said Aunt Hester. "I made no arrangements for lessons."

"Oh, yes, you did, ma'am," said Mr. Montgomery. "You wouldn't be here unless there was something you had to learn."

"Stuff and—"

Aunt Hester never got the "nonsense" out. Before she knew what was up, Mr. Higgens had thrown her to the floor and planted one large brogan firmly on her chest. Aunt Hester was a spare sort who was not too well equipped with natural padding, and the hobnails hurt. But that hurt was nothing compared to the one that came when Mr. Higgens reached down, grabbed hold of her long and aquiline nose, and tore it out by the roots.

Aunt Hester threshed and howled.

Mr. Higgens handed the nose over to Mr. Montgomery and addressed Aunt Hester sternly: "Come now, ma'am, we can't have this carrying on. How do you expect Mr. Montgomery to reassemble you when you're bouncing around like that?"

She just screamed all the louder. It wasn't until Mr. Montgomery knelt down and locked her head firmly between his knees that he was able to replace her nose in roughly its original position.

He groaned and rubbed his back gingerly as he pulled himself to his feet. "If Dr. Walters doesn't do something for my arthritis, I'm going to transfer over to rack detail! The pay's less and there isn't as much variety, but there wouldn't be any of this infernal bending up and down all day."

"Don't worry, Herbert," said Mr. Higgens comfortingly. "As soon as this damp spell passes, you'll feel better about the whole thing. You know you'd never be happy doing the same thing day after day. You're an artist. Come on, now. As soon as we finish up that case in 814 we'll both go down and have a nice cup of hot tea."

They reached down, picked Aunt Hester up, and placed her on her lumpy bed.

"We'll be back tomorrow morn-

ing to give you your next lesson, ma'am," said Mr. Montgomery.

They left.

Aunt Hester lay quivering for five minutes before she was able to drag herself over to the phone.

"Desk clerk," said a pleasant voice.

"I want the police!" gasped Aunt Hester.

"There, there," said the desk clerk in a soothing voice. "After a month or so you'll find yourself taking your lessons in your stride. If you'll try to cooperate with Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Higgens when they come around tomorrow, you'll find it will make things much easier."

"There won't be a tomorrow!" snapped Aunt Hester. "I'm leaving here at once!"

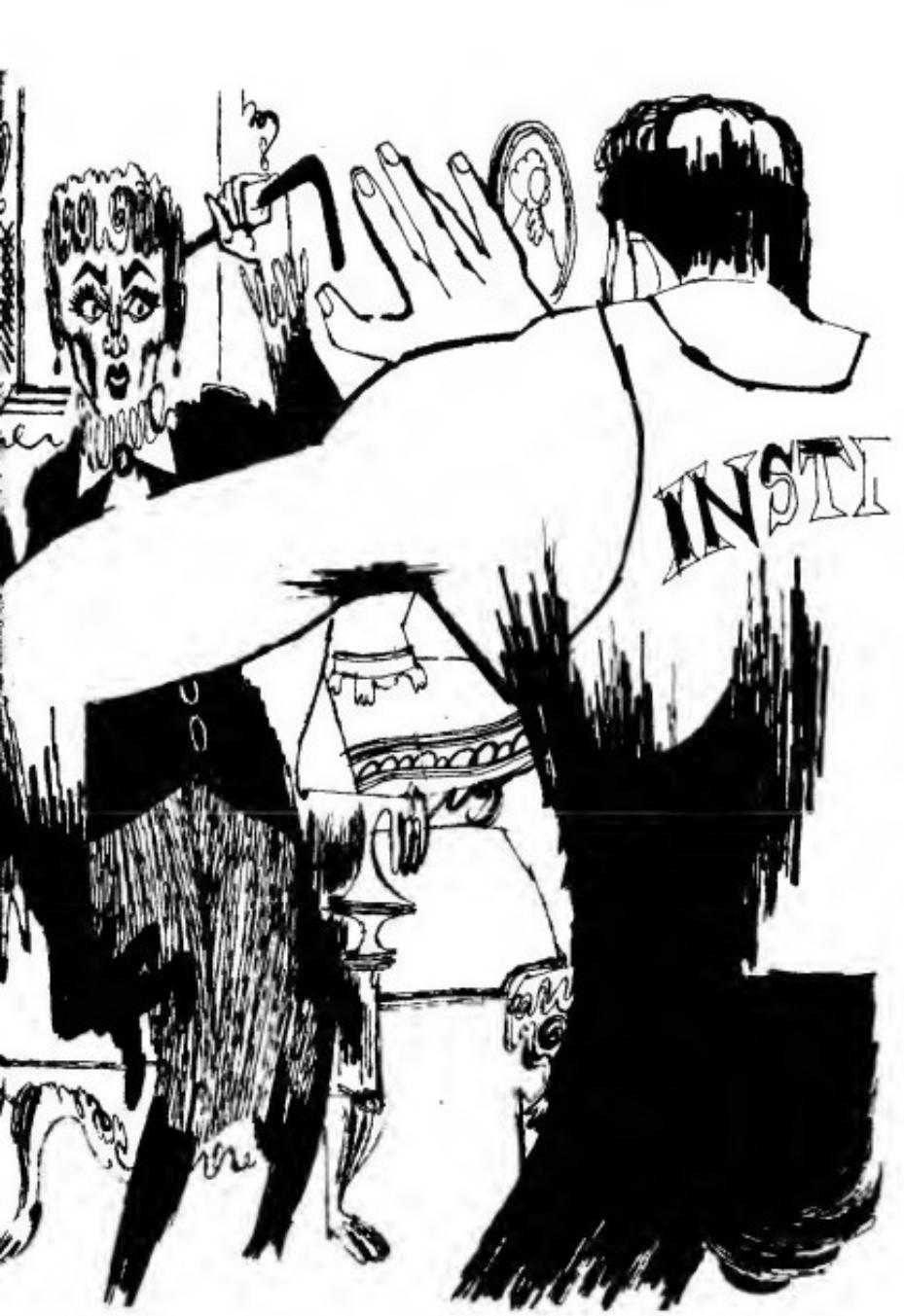
"YOU'LL hear from my lawyer," promised Aunt Hester as she passed the desk clerk on her way through the lobby.

Without looking back, she opened the front door and went outside onto the veranda, which we unoccupied except for a sad-faced and somewhat portly man who looked as if he were suffering from a severe toothache. He was sitting in a sagging old rocker and had both feet up on the railing.

"How does one get to town from here?" Aunt Hester demanded.

"One doesn't," he said sadly. It





DISASSEMBLY LINE

seemed to hurt him to talk, and he tried to form his words without moving his lower jaw. "What were you sent here for?"

"I fail to see that it's any concern of yours," said Aunt Hester primly. "But it just so happens that . . . that . . ."

Her voice suddenly quavered to a stop and a panic-stricken expression came over her face.

"I don't know," she whispered in a frightened voice. "I just don't know. I can't seem to remember. I found myself standing in the lobby, and I seemed to have a reason for being there—but what went before is just a blur."

"I know," said the portly man sympathetically. "But you'll remember after a bit. I think they muddle us up at first to make it easier for us. After a lesson or two, you'll suddenly remember everything again, and then you'll understand why you're here."

"Oh, no, I won't! I'm leaving, right now."

"You'll never get as far as the gate."

"We'll see about that," said Aunt Hester. "Good day, sir."

The grounds were surrounded by a high wall, and through a wide archway in it a graveled drive curved up to the veranda. Aunt Hester fixed her eye on the wrought iron gate, which didn't seem more than three hundred yards away, and started toward it

with a determined stride.

After ten minutes, she found she was only half way to it.

She glanced back to see if anyone was coming after her. The veranda was still unoccupied except for the portly man. He waved at her. She started to sniff, but finding her nose was still extremely sensitive, didn't. Instead, she started walking toward the gate again.

Aunt Hester was a past president of the Allentown Bird Watchers, and her stride was the efficient mile-eating one of an experienced hiker. On she walked, and on, fighting more and more unsuccessfully to keep down a feeling that something was wrong.

Twenty minutes later, she stopped again.

This time she was three-quarters of the way to the gate—close enough to see that it was partially open, and, though a shimmering haze across it made it impossible to see clearly, that there seemed to be a broad highway on the other side.

"Hello!" called a voice from behind her.

SHE turned around. The pudgy man had come down from the veranda and had walked half way to the gate.

"You'd better start back now," he called. "If you don't, you won't make it in time for supper. In an-

other hour you'll be close enough to the gate to reach forward and touch it, but you could walk the rest of your life and still never quite get through it."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Aunt Hester, and kept on walking.

Her legs were reaching out and taking precise one-yard strides, and when she looked down at little clumps of grass alongside the drive she saw she was passing them at a normal rate. But with the gate, it was a different matter. The longer she walked, the slower her approach became, until at last, in spite of what her senses told her about her rate of locomotion, it seemed as though she was standing still.

On and on she went; but even her stubbornness had a limit, and when the dinner gong finally rang, she became aware that she was ravenously hungry as well as being somewhat footsore.

"I'll make a fresh start early tomorrow morning," she promised herself, and turned back toward the hotel. The pudgy man waved at her sympathetically and went in to dinner.

It took her just as long to go back as it had to go out. When she finally staggered back up the steps onto the veranda and collapsed into the nearest chair, it was pitch dark and dinner had been over for two hours. After she partially recovered her breath, she walked

stiffly back through the lobby, looking neither left nor right, stonily ignoring the desk clerk's pleasant question as to whether she had enjoyed her walk.

Aunt Hester was an austere person little given to tears, but when she finally got back into her dingy room and shut the door behind her, she could control herself no longer. Exhausted and discouraged, she threw herself on her hard bed, buried her face in her lumpy pillow, and sobbed convulsively until the slight remaining swelling in her long nose was matched by a tearful puffiness around her reddened eyes.

Eventually, her lamentations were cut short by a knock at her door.

"Who's there?" she sniffled.

"Mr. McCreary. I'm the one who was talking to you out on the veranda this afternoon. I saved a piece of chicken for you from supper."

"Go away . . . please."

There was a moment of silence, and then as her stomach growled protestingly, she began to regret her words.

"Er . . . Mr. McCreary?" she said finally in a weak voice.

He was still there. "Yes?" he said eagerly.

"Did you say chicken?"

"I did. I brought some bread and butter, too."

"Just a moment," said Aunt

Hester. Going over to the wash basin, she dampened a towel and did what she could to repair the ravages of tears.

"Come in," she said finally.

TEN minutes later, she felt somewhat happier about life. Conversation was a bit strained at first, of course—Aunt Hester had never been alone in a hotel room with a man before, and she was careful to leave the door partly open for appearance's sake.

"I guess I should have listened to you this afternoon," she said finally.

"There are some things people just have to find out for themselves," he said. "I did. I turned back after a half an hour, though." He patted his fat paunch apologetically. "I've got too much bulk on me to do very much in the way of long distance walking. If I ever get back, I'm going to get myself in condition again."

"What do you mean, 'if'?" said Aunt Hester. "You can't just give in and let them keep you here! There must be some way out!"

He shook his head. "There isn't. I've checked. There's some sort of area of distortion that goes all around the place—no matter how long you walk, you never quite get out. No matter how far you go, it always takes as long to cover half the remaining distance as it did to get where you are. Before very

long, you're moving forward so slowly that you might as well be standing still. The mathematicians have a name for the process, but I'll be darned if I can remember it."

"Then we're trapped?" Aunt Hester was on the verge of tears again, but didn't want to show it.

"You can call it that. Once a person is brought here, he isn't allowed to return until he has learned his lesson."

"What lesson?" demanded Aunt Hester. "What's all this talk about lessons? What am I doing here? Why can't I remember?"

"You will," said Mr. McCreary soothingly, "in due time." He stroked his jaw and grinned wryly. His pudgy face took on a boyish expression that Aunt Hester found strangely attractive.

"For once," he said, "I'm going to keep my big mouth shut. It's something you just have to figure out for yourself."

"Will I have to stay here long?" asked Aunt Hester anxiously. "After all, I've got responsibilities. I've got a job. I've got a family. I can't stay away when everything needs taking care of!"

At the mention of the word *family*, Mr. McCreary's face fell.

"You're married?"

"No. First there was Mother to take care of, and then my niece, Muriel. I've raised her since her mother died, and I don't know

what she'll do without me being around to take care of her."

"How old is she?" asked Mr. McCreary.

"Twenty-two. But she's still a child. Right now, she wants to marry some penniless writer, and if I'm not around to show her what's best for her, she's apt to make a terrible mistake! She's a sweet child, Mr. McCreary, but she just isn't practical . . . I've had Mr. Keeler, our branch manager, over for dinner a dozen times just so the two of them could get to know each other, and instead of playing her cards right, she practically ignores him just because he's a little fat and bald."

"I CAN understand that," said Mr. McCreary sadly. "It's been a long time since a girl's eyes kindled upon looking at me. I'm not married myself," he added. "For some reason, most people here aren't. It's usually the lonely ones that start tampering with the lives of those around them because they have nothing better to do."

He stood up and smiled shyly. "It's been nice being with you. Good night."

He was almost to the door when her voice halted him. "Mr. McCreary."

"Yes?"

"Please tell me why I'm here."

"I'm sorry, my dear—" the words seemed to slip out without

his realizing it— "but I can't. If I did, they'd give me a special refresher course." He wiggled his lower jaw reflectively. "I don't know whether I could take it."

As he shut the door behind him, Aunt Hester sat staring blankly after him, the words *my dear* ringing pleasantly in her ears.

"Perhaps," she whispered to herself, "perhaps after all these lonely years . . ."

But when she thought of her long horse-face and her jutting beak of a nose, the words turned flat and cold. Sighing wearily, she undressed and crawled into bed.

At seven, she was awakened by the buzz of her telephone.

"Yes?" she said sleepily.

"Mr. Huggins and Mr. Montgomery will be up in twenty minutes to give you your lesson. They have a very tight schedule today, and the management would appreciate it if you would be as cooperative as possible."

The next quarter-hour was the longest and worst she had ever known. She thought again of flight, but knew it was hopeless—there was no lock on the door and no place to hide.

When they finally came in, she didn't fight them. She lay back on her bed and closed her eyes.

"That's good, ma'am," said Mr. Montgomery encouragingly. "It'll all be over in a minute."

Mr. Huggins took hold of her

long nose with his strong right hand, braced himself against the bed, and then, with a sudden wrench, ripped it off her face. It was worse than the day before, because she knew what was coming. She screamed, though she had resolved not to—and by the time Mr. Montgomery had completed his work of reassembly, she was almost unconscious.

It was several minutes after they left before she realized that she was alone—that the lesson for the day was over.

Five minutes later, her memory suddenly came back.

SHE found Mr. McCreary on the veranda.

He rose to his feet with a look of honest pleasure on his face, and held out his hands to her. Without thinking, she took them.

"It's good to see you," he said.

"It's good to see you, too," she answered. Then, suddenly aware that she was still holding his hands, she dropped them in embarrassment.

"How was the lesson?" he asked.

"Horrible," she said, "horrible."

"So was mine. But no more so than usual."

He led her over to a chair and they both sat in silence, looking out across the bright green grass to the gate that led to . . . someplace. The haze along the wall rippled

and danced like heat-waves. There was heavy traffic on the highway beyond, traffic that moved both ways; but it was seen merely as a series of wavering blurs.

"I don't know," he said at last, in response to her unspoken question. "I can guess where they are going, but I have no way of checking on it. All I can say is that if by some weird chance you should discover a way to get through the gate, when you get on the road turn right."

A faint sound of marching feet came from the other side of the wall, and a faint murmur as if voices were counting cadence. Aunt Hester strained her eyes, but the haze in front of the gate seemed to thicken and she could see nothing.

"They sound like soldiers," she said.

"They are," said Mr. McCreary soberly. "They pass every day now. And every night, too. Sometimes they glow in the dark."

There was another moment of silence and then Aunt Hester said, "Mr. McCreary."

"Why don't you call me Henry?" he said shyly, his eyes fixed on the worn wooden floor of the veranda.

"All right, Henry; if you'll call me Hester."

She paused.

"Henry."

"Yes, Hester?"

"I remember now . . . the haze inside my head is all gone."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

She nodded.

"Tell me."

"Well," she began, "Muriel and I were setting the table for supper, and I was arguing with her. I had invited Mr. Keeler for dinner, and I was planning to go out afterward and leave them alone. From the hints he'd dropped that day, I knew he was ready to propose. I was trying to persuade Muriel to say yes, and she was being stubborn—she had always been a very dutiful child, Henry, but now her head was so filled with that young writer that I couldn't seem to get anyplace with her. Then I'm afraid I lost my temper." She hesitated. "It's not very pleasant now that I look back on it . . ."

"Go ahead," said Mr. McCreary sympathetically. "Sometimes it's better to talk things out."

"I told her," said Aunt Hester in a subdued voice, "that I'd given up my whole life for her—that I'd passed up chances to marry and have a home and children of my own, just so that I could raise her properly. Then I asked her if all those years meant nothing. Her face went white and all the resistance rushed out of her. I told her to pick up the phone and call her young man and tell him that she was getting married and could never see him again. She stood

like a dead person, and I picked up the phone and closed her fingers over it. She started to dial his number . . . and then suddenly the whole room vanished, and I found myself standing in the hotel lobby. Did something like that happen to you?"

"Yes," said Henry. "Just about. Everybody here has a story something like that. I've always talked too much, and sometimes the things I say hurt people. I don't intend to, but things just slip out. It kept getting worse and worse."

"You see," he said, "I haven't any family, and ever since I've been in Allentown I've lived down at the Athletic Club. I've always been afraid of women, and sitting around the lounge talking is one of the only ways I have of fighting off loneliness. I guess you could call me an old gossip. I had no life of my own, so I gained a sort of vicarious excitement by talking about the lives of others."

As he talked, his hand crept over and touched hers. She shivered, but didn't pull away.

"I live in Allentown, too," she said.

IT was two weeks later, after a most difficult lesson, that Mr. Montgomery paused at the door of her room and said: "Mr. McCreary is leaving us today, ma'am. I thought you might like to know."

She felt the old familiar loneli-

ness start to grow within her again. "Can I say good-by to him?"

Mr. Montgomery nodded. "You'd better hurry, ma'am. He's waiting for you out on the veranda."

She ran down the stairs and out to him.

"Henry," she said, and her voice choked. "I—I . . ." She stopped, annoyed at her sudden inarticulateness. All her life she had prided herself on her ability to call a spade a spade, and now she found herself blushing and stuttering like a schoolgirl. "I'm very glad for you," she finished lamely.

"Is that all?" he asked.

She started to say "no" but she couldn't form the word. There was a moment of awkward silence.

"Well," he said finally, "I guess I've finally learned to keep my big mouth shut." He fingered his chronically swollen jaw. "After thirty-seven hundred disassemblies, I should have."

"When are you leaving?"

"Any minute now." He, too, seemed to be having trouble with his vocal cords. He swallowed twice and then said: "Hester . . ."

"Yes, Henry?"

"When you come back, could I come and see you sometime?"

"Of course, Henry. Mine is a big house and an empty one. With Muriel gone, I'll be lonely."

Mutely, he reached out his arms as if to draw her to him. She shut

her eyes and waited, her pulse throbbing in her throat. She felt suddenly young again. Then, just as suddenly, the warm feeling vanished, and she felt worn and tired and alone.

She opened her eyes to the empty veranda. Henry had been taken back.

DRY-EYED she went back to her room and picked up the telephone beside her bed.

"Desk."

"I want to see the man in charge of this place at once."

"He's terribly busy," said the clerk uncertainly.

Something had happened to Aunt Hester. Instead of snapping back, she said humbly, "I know, but this is terribly important."

There was a moment of silence at the other end of the wire and then he said, "He'll be right up."

Two minutes later, the blond young desk clerk walked into her room. Aunt Hester looked past him expectantly, waiting for somebody to follow him in. Nobody did.

"Isn't he coming?" she said finally.

The young man chuckled. "He did. I'm him. In addition to running the elevator, I also run the whole place. I wasn't kidding when I said we were short-handed. Now, what can I do for you?"

"I've got to get back," said Aunt Hester quietly. "I'm needed."

"Yes?"

"I want to triple my lesson load."

The young man looked suddenly grave. "I suppose you have a special reason?"

"A very special one."

"Mr. McCreary?"

Aunt Hester laughed mirthlessly and pointed at the mirror. "With a nose like that, what chance do you think I stand. No, it's my niece—she's about to make a stupid marriage, and I've got to get back in time to stop it."

"But Mr. McCreary seemed most attentive to you while he was with us."

"He was just lonely," said Aunt Hester sadly. "He won't be any more, once he gets back with his friends. Can I take the extra lessons?"

"Increasing the number doesn't necessarily mean shortening your stay, you know," warned the young man. "And once you've contracted for them, it is forbidden to cancel. Most of our students are barely able to keep going with one a day. Nobody has ever tried to take three."

"In that case, I'll be the first," said Aunt Hester grimly. "My mind's made up!"

"It may take you years yet."

"I know."

He picked up the phone and spoke softly into it. "In that case, we will begin at once," he said,

turning back to her. "Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Huggins will be up in a minute."

He sat down in one of the straight-backed chairs and lit a cigarette. "Have you figured out where you are yet?"

SHE shook her head. "I know it isn't Hell, because people can return. And if there is anything to what I've heard in church all my life, this certainly isn't Heaven."

"It's under the same central management, though. This is my baby," he said proudly, "and I've got a private hunch that within another hundred years Hell will be running at less than twenty per cent of its rated capacity.

"I got the idea from watching Pavlov's experiments on conditioned reflexes in dogs. If it works on animals, I thought, why shouldn't it work on humans? It was a tough fight to get permission to set this place up—the older group, with all their ideas about hellfire and damnation, have more power than you might think. But when I pointed out that after all these millennia of running Hell at full blast, the damnation rate has never dropped by a single per cent, they had to give in.

"'Reform's the ticket,' I said. 'Catch them before they've damned themselves and recondition them. What's the point in locking the barn door after the horse has

been stolen?" They finally agreed to let me set up an experimental operation. I have a ridiculously small budget, and my teaching and research staff is only half the size it should be, but in spite of that I've had a redemption rate of one hundred per cent since I first started operations.

"Redemption through reconditioning! It's a simple matter of managerial common sense: Catch them when they first start to slip off the straight and narrow, correct the slight moral defect that's causing the difficulty, and you've got no more trouble after that. I remember the case of a decent enough fellow whose only fault was that he'd talk the leg off anybody who came near him. He just wanted to be sociable, but it got so that people started shunning him. This just made matters worse, and he started to grow sour inside. Then one night he cornered some poor fellow at a party and . . ."

Aunt Hester never did find out what happened then, because Mr. Montgomery and Mr. Higgens made a sudden entrance.

"This is your last chance to change your mind," said the young man sternly. "Remember, it may be years before you will be permitted to leave here."

Aunt Hester shook her head and stretched out on the bed. "I'm ready," she said grimly, and shut her eyes.

There was a moment of whispered conversation among the three men, and then she felt Mr. Higgens' strong fingers taking hold of her nose. She clenched her teeth and waited. When it came, the pain was not as severe as it usually was.

"What'll I do with it?" said the voice of Mr. Higgens.

"Throw it in the wastebasket," said the voice of Mr. Montgomery.

Aunt Hester heard a dull thud as something thunked into the metal container.

SHE bit down on her lower lip and waited. She felt Mr. Montgomery's fingers working over the place where her nose had been. Wherever they touched, a blessed numbness took place of the searing pain. He seemed to be twisting and molding something.

At last he stepped back with a grunt of satisfaction.

"Mr. Montgomery," said Mr. Higgens in tones of awe, "you are a proboscitary Rembrandt."

"You may open your eyes now, Miss Winston," said the young man.

She did. The great beak that had cleft the air between her mouth and her eyes for the last forty-eight years was gone. She looked over at the wastebasket.

"It wasn't a thing of beauty," she said, "but it was the only nose

I had. I'm going to miss it—especially when I have a cold."

The three men grinned at her.

"You haven't been ruined," the young man said. "Go look in the mirror."

She did. She blinked as if she couldn't believe her eyes, and then let out a whimper of delight. Mr. Higgens had merely removed the end, and Mr. Montgomery had reassembled what was left into a lovely little retroussé nose that any Hollywood starlet would be proud to present to the critical eye of the camera. And the nose wasn't all that had changed: with its new shape, the heavy bones of her face that had formerly seemed harsh and ugly now seemed instead strong and interesting.

"If you can break away from the mirror long enough to answer a simple question, we will now conduct the final examination," said the young man.

"The what?" gasped Aunt Hester.

"The final examination. Be careful how you answer. If you don't pass, your new nose will be taken away from you and you'll be sent back to the bottom of the class."

Aunt Hester's courage suddenly deserted her. "Can't I wait until tomorrow?" she faltered.

"I'm afraid not."

"Then . . . can I have just a few minutes to think about it?"

He shook his head. "I've got to get back to the desk. I've got three hand cases waiting to check in."

"What kind?" asked Mr. Montgomery with professional interest.

"The usual. One chap who always has his hand in somebody else's pocket, another who never lets his right hand know what his left hand is doing, and a third who always has his fingers in half-a-dozen pies at the same time."

"Give the last to somebody else," said Mr. Higgens. "Six separate disassemblies each lesson period is too much."

"Well?" said the young man to Aunt Hester.

"I'm ready," she said quietly.

"What have you learned since you've been here?"

She told him.

THREE was a horrible moment of waiting, and then the look on his face told her that she had passed. She ran over and gave Mr. Higgens and Mr. Montgomery each a kiss so long and fervent that she left them breathless and blushing. She was starting toward the young man to do the same to him when suddenly, without warning, and with no period of transition, the hotel room vanished and she found herself standing by her own dining room table with three forks in her hand.

Across from her stood a pretty

young girl, her face set and stubborn and her hands clenched.

"I don't care *how* much money he has!" the girl stormed. "He's old and he's fat and he's nasty and—" her voice broke and she started to wail—"and I love Alan."

Aunt Hester went over to her and gave her a little hug. "Look at me, child."

Muriel looked—and then looked again. "Aunt Hester! Your nose! What happened!"

"I had it taken care of, honey. You're just so used to me that you probably haven't taken a good look at me in years."

"But . . . you're beautiful!"

The older woman looked complacently into the mirror over the sideboard. "Stuff and nonsense," she said, and started removing one place setting from the table.

Muriel watched her in surprise. "Isn't Mr. Keeler coming?" she said hopefully.

"There's been a change of plans."

The girl let out a tremendous sigh of relief. "Then we can have dinner alone, just like always."

"Oh, no, we won't. You go find

your young man and tell him to buy you a hot dog or something." Her fingers went up and caressed the pert snubness of her new nose lovingly. "And, Muriel, if you ever catch me sticking my nose into somebody else's business again, give me a good kick where it will do the most good. I've learned my lesson the hard way, and I'd hate to have to go back for a refresher course."

"Back where?" asked Muriel.

Aunt Hester put her arms around the girl and drew her close. "I hope you never find out, dear . . . Now be off with you!"

Muriel made one last feeble protest: "But I don't want to leave you alone in this gloomy old house."

Aunt Hester smiled a secret smile. "I have a feeling that somebody down at the Athletic Club is sitting by his telephone, waiting for an invitation to dinner. You run along, honey. I won't be lonely. Not ever again."

Theodore R. Cogswell

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A Brush With the Enemy

By H. CHANDLER ELLIOTT

Illustrated by CONNELL

*It was an impossible assignment
—old Carl had to stop a mechanized
army with nothing but a pot of paint!*

THE manager of the toy-soldier factory was lean and efficient, with a black ribbon looped from his pince-nez. He was being efficient now. "What's this, Ruger, about you refusing to paint modern types, saying they're ugly? *Bosh!* Not so gaudy as the historicals, maybe, but very smart, very romantic, many of them. When we give an employee suitable work, we don't tolerate his acting like a prima donna."

Old Carl Ruger drew himself up. He was a stalwart old individual, with magnificent, upspiked mustaches. He sharpened the

mustaches and replied with dignity, "Not an employee, Herr Nasser—an artist, working on commission. I dislike the modern types, because they're ugly in meaning. Once, soldiering was a sport—a very rough sport, yes, and often one naturally got killed. But life was dull in those days, and a man needs peril in the open. Now, war is an industry men must toil at, though their lives are not at all dull."

"And how do you know so much about it, Ruger?" Nasser sneered.

"I was young, not so long ago

—and I was sergeant-major in the ski-troops. The Swiss army I enjoyed. They say we are the best in the world for our size still, though we have fought no wars for a century. Most armies today I would not enjoy."

"So! And what work would Your Excellency *enjoy* doing now?"

"Greek warriors, knights, Ben-galis, Highlanders, Anspachers, any gallant regiment that was colorful, drank of life like wine and even did some good at times. These are my comrades, Herr Nasser, and I will stand by them forever! Fly-boys too, fighters! *That's* a game if you don't mind risking a crash—which nobody seems to mind risking with an auto! But not bombers, no! And not uniforms that make all men alike and all miserable. If my work does not satisfy, I can go to Irrnsee and work for Schnaufen and Company."

Nasser looked baleful in a small way. "It would seem, the less demand we have for a model, the better you like it. Well—we shall see."

IN SPITE of his sturdiness, Old Carl went home feeling as if a wind off the glaciers had chilled his precarious grip on independence. The town of Glocken paid its way in the world by making toys, and the main street was lined

with show windows where jungles of stuffed animals, hatcheries of doll-babies, tractors, balls, paints, and so on awaited wholesale buyers. Old Carl admired all, but only as he passed, because he loved most of all the soldiers, of which he hauled a cartonful on an express wagon he had salvaged.

In his attic, he transformed little silver potentialities into brilliant martial figures. His big fingers worked so skillfully that he kept himself very comfortably at only a penny apiece. Yet he finished each with such excellent care that its future owner could imagine it was a real little man, not a dummy. He knew every detail of every uniform, from French zouaves to Canadian mounties, from Marathon to Mukden, from savage tribe to proud navy. At night, he slept on a camp cot while the soldiers dried, watching him with their hundreds of eyes. In the morning, he packed them in long, shiny, exciting boxes, loaded them on his wagon and returned to the factory to exchange them for another batch.

And so it went for a while, after Nasser's veiled threat. Sometimes the types Old Carl liked were not sufficient to keep him busy. But he didn't mind losing a little money in a good cause. However, a few weeks later, when he appeared one morning, he was directed to a distant corner of the factory. There,

he found Nasser waiting beside a long machine, all levers, pulleys and dials. With a dill-pickle smile, Nasser said, "Watch this, Ruger."

From a box he took a dozen silvery figures, pre-1914 French infantry as Old Carl knew at a glance, clipped them to a pulley belt and closed a switch. The belt began to move. Brushes and spray nozzles popped out beside it, jiggling and poking. The figures were quickly smeared with green stands, black boots, red trousers, blue coats, pink faces and red kepis. On each was implanted a row of buttons and a face of equally impersonal black dots. It was all done in two minutes—it would have taken Old Carl forty. He stared dumbfounded, feeling as if his fingers were numbing and slipping from his grip on a mountainside.

"Well," said Nasser, "what do you think of that, eh?"

Old Carl examined the result. "They all look exactly alike. Only misfortune will distinguish them."

"Well, dumbhead, that is how soldiers are supposed to look."

Old Carl clutched at any twig that might stay his fall. "For your battle-dress monstrosities, this will be ideal, though it will rob good workmen. But for real warriors—knights, cavaliers, guardsmen—it is worthless."

"So you think, Ruger. But our buyers will not agree. And the machine will paint what I tell it to.

For special jobs—your knights and cavaliers—we can use you. No doubt, you have money laid by for your old age, and these little *commissions* will amuse you—since you are an *artist*—and buy you luxuries, eh?" Mean sarcasm and petty triumph leered through the words.

OLD Carl did have money saved, enough to keep him for two months, as if he hung by a slowly fraying rope. He had a little pension too, but not nearly enough to maintain him in the independence that was his pride in life. And he missed the work—maybe twenty special models a week and dancing attendance for those? No!

A trip to Irrensee deepened his gloom. There too, they had installed machines that turned out stolid dummies instead of gallant adventurers. The foreman—an ignoramus who would have put blue coats on British grenadiers—remarked, "They'll pay for themselves in two years."

Yes, thought Old Carl, *out of my money, that I would have earned making something real.*

He got handy man jobs, but found no joy in cutting lawns and painting furniture. And, with the approach of winter, a man his age, however sturdy, met difficulty in finding such work. He had to postpone paying his rent because, if he spent his pension on that, he could

get no decent food. So, sure as fate, the night before Christmas, his landlord came knocking.

This landlord was short and plump as Nasser was tall and skinny, but he looked and was just as mean. He said without ceremony, "You're no longer working, Ruger. You have nothing to pay the month's rent you owe me. That won't do . . . Now, I am a humane man. In my own car, I will drive you to the Old Men's Home in Staufhausen. You would begin auspiciously there tonight, because they have mutton stew and, on Christmas day, they get suet pudding and extra tobacco. You will not need your brushes and things, therefore I will accept them for your rent because I am humane."

Old Carl choked down his fury. He, a recent sergeant-major in the famous ski troops, to end his days among derelicts—who had lost health, wealth and pride, by folly—in a place where mutton stew was a treat! He, who relished good sausage and beer and cheese, and had the painting of millions of soldiers in him. No!

But this little rascal, as oily as a castor bean, might be ugly if he were openly defied. Old Carl sounded as submissive as he could. "Yes, sir. In an hour?"

In that hour, he packed his paints—worth six months' rent—clean clothes, all the food he had

and three bottles of beer, in a carton. He then lashed it to his wagon and simply walked away with it.

"For," he told himself, "we of this canton come of a people fond of machinery and, perhaps, it is natural for us to use it even to paint soldiers. So I will cross the mountains to the French cantons, where they are artists and will appreciate a fellow-artist." He wasn't too convinced himself, but it was at least a plan of campaign.

He hastened through the town followed by the good wishes of golliwogs, chessmen and other friends.

He paused a moment only to stare somberly at the stupendous block castle in one show window. Ach, for such a castle of his own to shut out the dull and ugly world! But now he had to flee even from scoundrels. For he knew the landlord would be angry when he found his prey had escaped, paints, clothes and all—even though Old Carl had left, on the paint-daubed table, an IOU which he would surely pay when his luck changed.

Beyond the town, he struck out along the fine Autobahn. "In my youth," he muttered, "I often marched sixty kilometers in a day, and it will be strange if I cannot still do thirty. I will stop at the free hostels, and my last pension money will buy me food. In a week, I shall be in Geneva, and



A BRUSH WITH THE ENEMY

then we shall see." A feeling of adventure made his feet march briskly, and the wagon rumbled sturdily behind.

Then it began to snow—lightly at first—sticking to eyebrows and mustache, but soon like old women plucking geese. Snow didn't bother him personally, but it made the wagon pull heavily. *If only some German or American tourist would come along*, he thought, *and give me a lift*. He had no prejudice against cars, but tourists were all snug in their hotels, enjoying their Christmas Eve suppers.

At last, he paused by a stone wall and considered. On summer Sundays, he had often tramped out to the nearest hostel and back, but that had been in the afternoon, with no heavy wagon to pull through snow. Better he should hide the wagon behind this wall and come back for it in the morning, when ploughs had cleared the road. He rummaged out his food and then, sensibly, decided to carry some as fuel inside him, instead of as dead weight in his pockets. First, he had a bottle of beer, and then munched his good bacon and rye bread cheerfully, washing it down with a second bottle.

Bottles of beer were no more than cups of coffee to Old Carl—something to wash off the world when it grew drab. But now some odd chemistry in him responded

awry. The snow flooding down closed him into a private, tiny universe, shut out Glocken, Herr Nasser, the machine, the landlord, even the highway a few yards off. He stood alone with his wagon, box and one bottle of beer, feeling as if he were in a lobby from which doors opened on all sides into different worlds.

Well, he thought, an ex-sergeant-major of ski troops could deal with any of them, and perhaps better than with this disjointed one, which was not a world for men any more, since fighting was done by machines—even children's toys! He thought of the great cavalcade of splendid figures that had tamed Earth, sea and sky, and battled it out, even among each other, with sword, lance and bow, in a tumult of proud emblems and gallant finery. And he thought of the dispirited hordes in drab, gray and dead-green, who had not even anything left to fight for, except that the machines needed targets. It made him feel glum. He opened the third bottle.

"Here's to any other world!" he cried and drained it, knowing it would probably switch his mood, though he could not tell what the new mood would be—a new mood, a new world. *Prosit!*

FOR a moment, only the snow continued to swirl down in the gathering dusk, so even an old

ski-trooper had better push on to get under cover. And then he heard the motor noise. A tourist after all? But it grew louder till the air seemed to throb, something loomed out of the smother and he stepped back against the wall as a plane on skis slid toward him on the broad shoulder of the road. Was it a trick of the eye that it seemed tiny at first—you surely couldn't see far in *this*—and spread to a mighty size as it stopped ten meters away?

Three men jumped out, stood at attention and saluted smartly. The one in front wore a military great-coat with cape and a shako with a paint brush plume—West Point Cadet, Winter Parade Order. The other two were RCAF pilots. The cadet snapped out of his salute and said, "Carl Ruger, *Freiherr von, zu und ringsherum Glocken*, may I intrude on your valued time for a moment?"

"Well," said Old Carl, shrugging, "all that isn't my name—just Carl Ruger, Sergeant if you like. But if that's all right, I'm at your command."

"Roger! I am Captain Peter Gingerly, Aide-de-camp to His Metallic Majesty, Leadward the Tenth, of Younger and Older Spielzimmer. His Majesty has dispatched me most respectfully to beg your advice in a great crisis. *If* you can spare the time!"

Old Carl stroked his chin.

"Well, I'm not busy with anything that won't keep. But see here now, hadn't I better talk this over with His Majesty in person?"

"Great!" The Captain's pink, boyish face lit up. "Would you really do that, sir?"

"It might be better than Geneva," said Old Carl shrewdly. "How do I get there?"

The Captain gestured to the plane and, without more ado, Old Carl, wagon and all, was ushered inside.

The plane was fitted out with an eye to masculine luxury. Old Carl supplemented his supper with venison pastry, liebfraumilch and marzipan, while they winged through the night.

CAPTAIN Gingerly explained matters. "Of course I'm not much on math or magic or that sort of thing, sir. But, you see, when people in your world, especially children—and artists like you, sir—imagine things *seriously*, those things happen in our world. Or else, when things happen in our world, people imagine them in yours. I'm not quite sure which. And what we imagine happens in *your* world."

"Professors and fairy tale writers." Old Carl grunted, stuffing his pipe with royal tobacco. "But since now, as I suppose, I am in *your* world, when did I stop being imagined by you or you by me,

so that we got into the same platoon?"

"Well, you see, sir, at Yule, imagination gets so revved up in both worlds, the whatchamacallit gets through the hootnanny, if you know what I mean."

"Here's another thing that might keep me awake thinking about it—am I as small as you are, or are you as big as I am?"

"The only thing I learned in symbolic thaumaturgy, sir, was to say, 'The question is meaningless.' Like this—if a kid's playing with toy soldiers, he's got no size of any kind, unless he decides he's going to be the general or the hero, and then he *is* them, if you see what I mean. So, when His Majesty imagined you, and you started to imagine us, *zowie!* I guess it made things kind of easy when we only had a bit of snow and wall and your wagon to imagine about, Roger?"

"That's sensible. *So!*" And he finished his pipe and turned in without further comment. But, as he fell asleep, he chuckled. These rascals had all along intended him to come. But *he'd* taken command. Fancy, a mere captain trying to outsmart a sergeant-major!

HE woke to find the flight over. When he had dressed and breakfasted on board, he was whisked in a staff car toward a magnificent fortress on a near-by

hill—Blockenberg Castle, the temporary capital, Captain Gingerly informed him. The royal banner, a teddy bear proper rampant, floated proudly from the highest pinnacle. But Old Carl noted that, on closer inspection, everything appeared neglected.

The guard of honor, drawn up in the courtyard to receive him, was composed of authentic guardsmen, but of so many different regiments and even armies, that the sergeant part of his soul was bothered, in spite of the honor.

To respectful inquiries by the staff officers—of five armies—who received him, he declared that he would never be more ready for action, and was conducted at once to the presence of King Leadward. Instead of throne room, crown, ermine and resplendent flunkies, he found King Leadward in the castle garden.

The king was a soldierly fellow, much like a model of Sir Walter Raleigh that Old Carl had once made for a tourist, with deep maroon jerkin and hose, a ruff at his throat, a rapier at his side and a close pointed beard.

He and his dazzling staff greeted Old Carl with profound respect—but, after brief, military courtesies, the king came at once to the point. "'Tis great presumption thus to discommode Your Lordship. But to whom else could we turn in our grievous trouble? In brief, dis-

astrous war ravages this once fair and happy realm."

"Well," said Old Carl, "wars should be sausage for you." He decided to disregard the lofty titles they insisted on giving him.

"Nay, sir! You of all men should know better than that. The true soldier loveth not war. For he must fight it—to the loss of manly sport and adventure."

"Well," said Old Carl, "who the mischief would attack a nation of soldiers?"

KING Leadward shook his head: "Haply so, My Lord. But this is a broil civil, the most ruthless of all wars. Nor does it go well for us. It happened thus—our people have ever been jealous of their own self-command. Of necessity, obeying orders on duty, off duty each sought change and adventure. But, of late, our newcomers have shown a strange sameness, as if cast from one mold even in their thinking."

"I see," said Old Carl, and he really did.

"On duty or off, they find pleasure only in what their fellows are doing also. In truth, they demand a dictator, some scurvy fellow who should save them even the trouble of deciding what they should do all together. This suited our stomachs but little."

An angry growl ran around the staff.

The king continued, "First, then, we secluded them in a remote province. But soon their numbers were such as to defy authority. Then too, they were better furnished with engines of war—saive in the air force—and we have devoted our last remaining fuel to bring you hither and to take you back."

"In fact, they went into war as an industry, not a sport," Old Carl said.

"Truly so! Defeating them in battle after battle was like defeating locusts. Nor did they reck for grievous losses, since they still had the same as what they had lost. Whereas, even when victorious, we said farewell to valued comrades that no others could replace. Thus, today the rebels hold three-fourths of this land and press us sorely even in this mountainous remnant. In sad truth, My Lord, if you cannot advise us, you shall witness how we perish, sword in hand."

As the king talked, Old Carl's heart swelled with the triumph of a chance to hit back at last. "See now—who's imagining me in this world of yours?"

"Why, who but yourself, My Lord, with my own poor aid?"

"Good. Then, my own fancy still makes things happen here?"

"Even so—but only, alas, within limits. Deeds you may imagine, but not their outcome. The stubbornness of destiny rough-hews

your ends, shape em as you will."

"That's all gingerbread. The rough-hewing suits me fine. Have you prisoners?"

"Thousands, once. But, in his last onset, the enemy released them all. Nor, in truth, had we where to keep them any longer."

Old Carl glanced around the gloomy staff, and his eye flashed. "Capture me a hundred or two of these lads. Maybe my art can make men of them. And, if so, with each victory, you will gain force, not lose it, *hein?*"

The king clapped hand on hilt. "My Lord," he exclaimed, "you have saved us! We shall bring you these knaves no later than tomorrow. In a recent raid, we captured a box of matches. We have no solder to mend the hundreds of brave men who have lost their heads and are useless in battle, and this our foeman knows. But, with matches, we can spike heads on 'em and, thus reinforced, sorely astonish the enemy corps at Dollhausen. To work, gentlemen, and plan this attack!"

NEXT morning, Old Carl stood beside the king on a balcony, while the castle garrison marched out to join the rest of the loyalist army in the assault on Dollhausen. They were indeed a motley remnant. The Graustark Light Infantry, for example, comprised Greek evzones, Prussians, Mexicans, Boer

Cavalry (dismounted), Confederate riflemen and Uhlans. In the reheaded regiment, commanded by Captain Gingerly, promoted for his exploit in fetching Old Carl, many had not even correct replacements. But Gingerly brandished his sword, and all heads cheered. A quorum of the Egyptian Camel-corps marched on foot behind a pipe-band pieced out from the four Highland regiments and was playing 'The Camels Are Coming.'

Presently, along the horizon, could be heard the deep boom of ten-ounce guns and the prickle of rifle fire. Old Carl and the king, on the highest turret of Blockenberg, stared intently toward Dollhausen for any clue as to how the battle was turning. The king, in breastplate and morion, gnawed his mustache, torn between a fury to be at the head of his men and the imperative need to see the outcome of Old Carl's experiment.

Suddenly, the tower trembled slightly, and the two watchers turned to see a vast man in cook's uniform drop seismically on one knee, gasping, "Treason, Sire! We are betrayed."

"Treason, *ha?*" the king exclaimed. "Where? Speak *out*, man!"

"Two kitchen helpers, Sire. Enemy agents. They looked natural in the scullery. I caught one climbing out the pantry window.

The other got away and swam the moat. He will tell about the big attack."

"Of that, the enemy already has tidings," said the king cavalierly.

"Yes, Your Majesty," said Old Carl, "but did he know we have practically no men left here? Has he troops—not engaged at Dollhausen—he could use to attack the castle?"

The king slapped his thigh. "'Tis well seen you are versed in the art of war, My Lord. Cook, how many able-bodied men have you in the kitchens?"

It turned out that the castle was garrisoned by twelve cooks, five gardeners, two Zulu warriors and six Apache Indians, who had been scouting all night.

Old Carl thought fast. "Where would the enemy likely attack? The east curtain? Good! Get those Indians busy mixing paints, anything they can scratch up. I want the Zulus with me. Your Majesty will know how best to dispose of the rest."

ARRANGEMENTS had hardly been completed when one Indian, who had been sent as lookout, came galloping up, waving his arm as the gates clanged shut and said, "Ugh! They come thataway."

Ten minutes later, a column of infantry lipped over the opposite hill and poured across the valley toward Blockenberg. Old Carl de-

scended to his post in the courtyard, where he planned to carry out his brush with the enemy.

He had no need to watch, to follow the planting of scaling-ladders, the arrival of the first assailant at the top, the furious mêlée as King Leadward led his doughty Household Troops in the defense. Apparently cleavers, carving knives, can openers, shears, and pruning hooks were proving effective. Crash followed crash as ladders were toppled by brooms and rakes. As Old Carl had anticipated, the enemy simply kept coming with ponderous discipline, relying on sheer weight of numbers, with no thought of trying less stoutly defended sectors. Soon, however, they were in such a tangle of capsized ladders that the defenders had time to heave down prisoners, which the two Zulus caught in a blanket and pinioned.

Old Carl went to work. The first he gave an effeminate mustache, flossy hairs springing up as his brush flicked across the lip, a monocle over a devil-may-care eye and a dueling scar. Then he stepped back, motioning his helpers to release the man, and rasped in his most formidable sergeant-major voice, "Well, and what the *Himmel-Donner-und-Blitzen* have you to say for yourself, Lieutenant?"

The fellow looked bewildered. "Why—uh—I really don't seem to

have been *myself* at all, you know." His Austrian accent now matched his uniform.

"Then who the devil *were* you?"

"Well—where I just came from, everybody seemed to be somebody else."

"So, if you were *all* somebody else, no one was anybody, *hein?*"

The fellow broke into a disarming grin. "There you have right! And a man can't be blamed for what nobody did, eh, Sergeant?"

Old Carl appreciated the man's wit, but growled, "Depends on what the man *does*."

"Looks like plenty of work up on the wall, undoing what nobody did."

"Good! *Famous!*" Old Carl clapped him on the back, his heart full of glee.

He transformed two more before the next assault.

Still, even with their help, the next onset was nip-and-tuck. The defenders were getting badly chipped. One cook lost his head, but they stuck it on with a peg hewn from a ladder. Old Carl began to fear his reinforcements might not keep up with casualties.

"*Prisoners!*" he roared. "Fast as you can, sling 'em. *I'll* fix the factory-made morons!"

Enemy uniforms, filled with a nightmare succession of identical tenants, tumbled from the wall. The Zulus, with joyous, dentifrice

grins, slung them down the barrel-chute into the wine-cellar—almost fifty were thus disposed of before the next lull. Then, Old Carl began working furiously on the few he could hope to transmogrify in the breathing spell. But he had reformed only five more when the battle took a desperate turn—a violent whamming began to shake the gate.

OLD Carl worked as if he had six arms, ordering each recruit to join his Indians in a slender cordon inside the gate. Then, as the iron-studded oak began to sag, he plunged his biggest brush in pink paint, swung to his Zulus with a muttered order and strode into the fray. With a "*Yassah, baas!*" the Zulus darted into the castle—and Old Carl met his foes face to face at last, if you could call what the others had faces.

They forged straight ahead, ten abreast over their own fallen. Each one that confronted him, Old Carl swiped with his brush, obliterating those behind. But the brush ran dry, the paint was upset, most of Old Carl's troop were beheaded or otherwise broken—even the Indians whose necks were reinforced with feather trains—and he was forced back onto the steps, overwhelmed by a wave of blank or brutal faces. Evidently, they intended capturing him alive, to work on some nefarious project. He caught a

glimpse of King Leadward, half his breastplate chipped off, his sword a stump, among the last of his followers, their backs to a turret.

At that moment, a stomach-jolting howl halted everything like an oil painting. Two ebony giants took the steps in a leap, red fringes flying and knobkerries whirling, followed by a disheveled mob of madmen. The impact hurled the all-but-victorious foe back through the gate, across their makeshift bridge, into a rout that had nothing mechanical about it except its velocity.

Old Carl leaped upon the parapet of the gatehouse and roared in a voice that had made real men from squads of mice, "Prisoners, you rascals! No one gets back in here without a prisoner!"

King Leadward limped stiffly to his side and gazed after the hunt with a puzzled crease between his brows. At length he said, "I fathom it not, My Lord. Yon knaves you cast into the cellar . . ."

Old Carl's eye-corners crinkled. "It was the *wine* cellar, Your Majesty. And my spare paints and brushes were stored there. It needed only a little Dutch courage for any soldier—even a machine-made dummy—to seize the chance of painting himself as a hero. They did themselves prouder than I could have done."

A thought darkened his triumph like a blizzard swooping from

mountain crags — and so they wouldn't need him any longer either. One of his brushes and a keg of beer could replace him. And he had never stayed where he didn't earn his keep. So, back to long roads and ugly machines, garrets and IOUs.

WHEN the main body marched back from Dollhausen, with droves of sullen prisoners, all in a heroic sunset like red and gold celestial uniforms, they were astounded to find two hundred men drawn up before the castle, banners flying, a hastily improvised band playing and wet paint signs discreetly displayed. And, that evening, the great court was a scene of colorful revelry. Rich wines and lemonades flowed like water and, over bonfires, animal crackers were roasted whole. Wagons rumbled out, with cheer for the front-line troops and hundreds of little paint pots with propaganda labels, to be scattered among the enemy.

From a balcony, Old Carl and the king looked on. Both seemed aloof from the general optimism. At length, His Majesty, tugging the point of his beard, exclaimed, "Well! In a month or two, we shall drive the last of the malcontents through Rocking Horse Pass and reclaim 'em or break 'em up for scrap. But . . ."

"I knew very well there was a but," said Old Carl somberly.

"A general once said truly, 'Tis well war has its fearsome aspects, else might we grow overfond of it.' In sooth, this campaign, with its peril of defeat in sad earnest, makes sham fights and hunting but savorless in prospect."

"See now, Your Majesty," said Old Carl with soldierly bluntness, "soldiers are good fellows, but one thing I will say they lack, and that is imagination. My notion is, life can't be just an endless game of king-o'-the-castle. Men must go forward!"

"Did any man move ever forward, the world were soon o'errun, My Lord."

Like a sudden vagary of Alpine weather, Old Carl's wit, that had never failed him yet—given the material—burst through the black future. He fitted pieces together and soldered them with common sense. "The *world, hein?* Your Majesty should study toyshop windows."

"In sooth? And what might I learn from such, My Lord?"

"On one little world, what can fighting men fight but each other—to the great inconvenience of civilians too. And now the *verdammte* machines have gotten hold of it. But where I come from, even small children imagine splendid deeds without end for brave fellows like yours—to conquer the moon, the planets, the stars. Right now, they are probably imagining that I

change your boys into star-sailors. That's a future, now, for men who need peril in the open and don't fancy blasting houses and kindergartens with bombs. Let them fight the perils of the great *wunderbar* sky, ride fiery steeds and battle hordes of gremlins."

"Methought you looked but greenly upon such mechanical cantrips, My Lord."

"*Quatsch*, not *I!* They're bad business if they get control of things. But, if we use 'em as the pioneers used their axes and muskets, or the fly-boys their buses, and we get the glory, they're fine by me."

The king's voice sprang up with incredulous delight. "And so you would abide with us, My Lord?"

"Why not then? I can imagine it. And I can manage things better from here. Only, first, I'll have to go back and settle an IOU I left my landlord."

THE king's teeth flashed gaily in his beard. "Nay, not so, My Lord. My nephew, a drummer-boy in the Continental Army, plays tirelessly with real civilians. Let him now but fancy your knavish host sues your rascally employer for quittance and bests him by some lawyers' jargon—and it will come to pass in very fact."

Old Carl grinned till his mustaches bristled. "By me, that passes fine!" Then a wicked glint lit his

eye. "Real civilians, *hein?* Now, since I am both here and imagining myself here, why couldn't I deal with them, too?"

"No reason whatsoever, were there need," said the king, mystified.

"Look once!" said Old Carl. "It isn't such a bad world, yonder. Leastways, it has kids in it, and they shouldn't all grow up respectable fools. Something should be done for them, especially now their toys are being made by machines."

"Naught could be truer, My Lord."

"*Thus!* I can't do two jobs at once, painting toy soldiers and real civilians. But if I do some of the latter, at least a few lads and *mädchen* will grow up as gay daredevils. Can be, most humans would rather be neat clockwork. But there'll always be a few live ones as long as I'm in charge. And, maybe, we can start a virtuous circle. They imagine us, we imagine them, *hein?* Let's see how the boys like the smack of our idea."

The king raised his hand and shouted in a trumpet like voice, "*Soldiers!*" When the uproar had faded out, he went on, "Soldiers, let us make an end to this war briskly. For, our most noble Lord Counselor has imagined a venture as much worthier of our metal as the most famous of stricken fields is beyond a game of football!"

Then he announced the half of

Old Carl's plan that concerned them, ending, "Thus, to the realms of Perrault, Grimm, Anderson and Baum, we shall add those of Verne, Wells, Eddison and Merritt and all the host of modern explorers. And our Lord Counselor shall hold all under his suzerainty as Admiral of the Ocean Space."

A cheer rose and swelled till some of the battlements trembled.

Old Carl stood, sinewy arms akimbo, cheeks pursed up till his mustaches almost touched his eyebrows, and wagged his head. Like all crowds, his admirers enjoyed yelling for him much more than listening to him. But suddenly he roared, "*Achtung!*" The part of the wall weakened by assault fell flat and troopers said, afterward, that their own voices had been halted at their teeth. "*Nix!*" said Old Carl. "It's very agreeable of Your Majesty. But what *I* want is the biggest garret in your castle, plenty of paint and the boys to visit me when they come back from adventuring. That way, I can do a competent job of imagining tales and bold rascals *nobody* has imagined yet for both worlds. That's *my* character whatever world I'm in."

"And," he added, "if you really want to do me a pleasure, just call me Sarge."

H. Chandler Elliott



the agony of the leaves

By EVELYN E. SMITH

Illustrated by EMSH

*When love came to Ernest, it
literally melted down his door!*



THE chimes over the door sounded. Ernest didn't want to answer, but he knew there was no use struggling any more—the outcome was inevitable. He walked to the foyer as slowly as he could, wondering which one of them it was this time. Whichever it was, she apparently thought he was taking too long to answer, for, when he was within a few yards of the door, his feet picked themselves up of their own volition and began to run.

He saved himself from a headlong crash into the door by thrusting his palm out flat before him. Instead of meeting inflexible wood, however, his hand was sucked into a spongy substance that became more glutinous the more it yielded. Damn the woman! She was melting down the door again. He was sure

it was Mrs. Greenhut—Miss Levesque would never do anything as subtle as all that.

He pulled his hand free and the door subsided in a puddle on the sill. Mrs. Greenhut stood in the corridor, a smile on her round, freshly washed face, a plate of cookies in her plump hand. Anybody seeing her for the first time—the bosomy, tightly corseted figure, the ruffled pink apron over the be-flowered green housedress, the plainly combed brown hair sprinkled with gray—would have taken her for just a pleasant, middle-aged matron. That was how Ernest had placed her when he'd moved into the apartment . . . had it been only two months before? It seemed like several eternities.

AND to think he'd been fool enough to smile at this moth-erly looking fiend, just in the hope of getting invited to a home-cooked meal! She could cook adequately, but she couldn't even brew a good pot of tea!

"I've brought you some cookies, Ernest dear," Mrs. Greenhut purred. "I baked them this morning, 'specially for you. They're real nice too, if I do say so myself."

"They look very good," he said, without extending a hand. "But, as a matter of fact, I do have a touch of indigestion, and the doctor said—"

"Take them, Ernest," Mrs.

Greenhut said. "You'll love them."

His right arm moved out stiffly, almost dislocating his shoulder, and took the plate.

"You will eat every one of them, Ernest. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mrs. Greenhut," Ernest mumbled.

"I've told you a thousand times, if I've told you once, to call me Gertrude."

"Yes, Gertrude. I'll eat every one of them—I swear it."

"Good boy," she approved, patting his cheek with a soft, floury hand. "Maybe they'll help to put a little flesh on your bones. Lately, you've been looking mighty peak-ed, seems to me."

"I like my physique exactly the way it is," Ernest protested. After all, if she didn't like his appearance, why was she pursuing him with her attentions? "I don't want to get fat."

"I like a man to eat hearty," Mrs. Greenhut said with finality. "And I like him to *look* hearty, too."

"Yes, Mrs. Greenhut—Gertrude."

"I have no use for thin people," she went on contemplatively. "'Specially thin women. Take that girl on the ground floor, for instance. Some people might call her attractive, but I personally think she's just a bag of bones. Probably starves herself too."

"Disgustingly skinny," Ernest

agreed hastily. "Completely repulsive! Not at all womanly, like—" he gulped "—like you, Gertrude."

"You have *such* good taste, Ernest. That's one of the reasons why I . . . like you. Of course—" she pinched his cheek affectionately—"there are other reasons too."

Ernest turned red and looked away. How he could hate her, if she would only let him!

"Well," she said briskly, "I must be running along. I have a roast in the oven."

"Good-by, Gertrude. Thank you for the delicious cookies."

"Good-by, Ernest. And remember, don't break the plate this time. It made me very, very unhappy when you smashed that other one, after I'd gone and brought you such a lovely devil's food cake."

"I didn't break the plate last time," he defended himself. "It was Miss Levesque. She dropped a piece of the ceiling on it."

"Oh, she did, did she?" Mrs. Greenhut said darkly. "I'll fix *her*! She did it purposely—she knows I set a lot of store on my Rockingham. It was my grandmother's." She resettled one of the combs in her hair and changed the subject with a simper. "Wouldn't you like to maybe kiss me before I go, Ernest?"

HE bent over stiffly and gave her a peck on the cheek. Satisfied—fortunately, she did not make

the demands on him that Miss Levesque did—she started away.

"Wait a minute!" he called down the corridor after her. "How about my door?"

She turned with a giggle. "I do declare, that was a plumb silly thing for me to do, wasn't it? But I've always been such a giddy creature—I just can't control my mad impulses. That's what Mr. Greenhut always used to say. 'Land's sakes, Gertie, I guess you'll just never grow up,' he used to say."

Ernest wondered vaguely, as he had wondered many times since signing his ill-fated lease, what had happened to the apparently deceased Mr. Greenhut. He wouldn't have been a bit surprised to hear that the woman had authored his departure.

Aloud, he complained. "But I really do need my door, Gertrude. There's a draft coming in from outside. You know, if anything happened to my nasal passages, it could ruin my future." She sniffed, and he added, "Or I might catch pneumonia and die." It would serve her right too . . . if only his death wouldn't involve himself so drastically.

"I'll solidify your door right away, dear boy," she said, apparently moved by this horrible prospect. "I wouldn't for the world," she went on archly, "want to lose you."

He groaned in an undertone.

She restored the door and Ernest trudged back into his living room, munching a cookie as he went. It tasted good. If only he could forget what was in it!

The gaunt, brightly painted features of Miss Levesque glared at him from the huge Venetian mirror over the mantelpiece. "Stop eating those cookies this very instant, Ernest. I *command* you!"

"I can't, Désirée," he said, fretfully. "You know that as well as I do. I'm under a spell. You remember what happened when you made me drink that champagne you made yourself?" In addition to being spiked, her wine had tasted as if she hadn't bothered to remove her shoes before trampling the grapes.

Miss Levesque emerged from the mirror, catching the train of her long red satin evening gown in the glass. She freed it with a jerk. "I *order* you to stop," she said, fixing him with her hot black eyes and gasping for breath, as she clambered down from the mantelpiece. Ernest held his breath until he could be sure that his *shu-dei* and *haku-dei* teapots were undamaged. She—both of them—were so careless with other people's property, as well as with other people themselves.

"Can't stop," he mumbled through a full mouth. "Besides, they're pretty good cookies at that. Why don't you try one? I don't

suppose it would have any effect on you. Go ahead," he urged.

MISS Levesque bit a cookie critically. "Wouldn't you know she'd skimp on the shortening? And she shouldn't have used the love potion *instead* of the vanilla."

"I'd offer you a cup of tea to go with 'em, but I can't stop eating long enough to go make it."

"Ernest Fitch!" She stamped her foot. "Stop eating the rest of those cookies. Do you hear me?" A heavy paperweight whizzed off the French provincial desk and shattered plate and cookies into bits.

Ernest mechanically got down on his hands and knees and began to pick fragments of the cookies out of the shards on the rug, dust them off and eat them. "Now see what you've done," he complained, chewing. "You've only given me more trouble, because I've *got* to eat them, every one. She put her spell on me first. And you've broken one of her good plates again too . . ."

"Hussy, *painted* hussy!" said Mrs. Greenhut's voice from thin air, for she was much too proper to materialize inside a man's apartment, even chaperoned by Miss Levesque. "Spoil my Rockingham set, will you? Two can play at that game, dear."

To his horror, Ernest found himself rising jerkily to his feet, walking—only it was actually more like

dancing—over to the desk and picking up a bottle of ink. This he poured methodically over Miss Levesque's head, down her decolletage. Although the act was against his volition, it was not against his inclination. "*Désirée!*" he yelled, fearing she could tell from his expression that he was not altogether unhappy. "I didn't mean to do it, honestly! She's *making* me!"

Miss Levesque forgot she was a lady. "Bless the heavenly woman!" she yelled. "Bless her, *bless her!* . . . just you wait and see, Gertrude! Will I put a spell on *you* later?" She tossed her head.

Ernest winced, as ink spattered on the beautiful new turquoise rug. Miss Levesque had selected it to match the color of his eyes, but he had paid for it, and a free-lance tea-taster's earnings — even if he were permitted to work steadily — wouldn't allow him to buy new rugs every day.

"I know it's not your fault, hon," she murmured in a tender bass, advancing upon him as he still scrabbled for crumbs on the floor. "Come here and give me a nice gooey kiss."

He backed away on all fours. She frowned ominously. "So you find me repulsive, do you?"

"No, no!" Ernest's voice rose to a squeak, as unseen, icy fingers used his spine for a xylophone. "You're fascinating, really *fascin-*

ating, Désirée, I assure you." His voice cracked. "But you've ink all over yourself. You wouldn't want me to get ink on my suit, would you? It's a Brooks Brothers' suit," he added lamely.

"I suppose not," she sighed, halting her advance. "I wouldn't want to do a single, solitary thing to make you less handsome than you are, sweetie."

HE hid his eyes in embarrassment and started again to eat crumbs hurriedly from the rug. It wouldn't even occur to her to offer to make him a cup of tea. Not that she could—without a tea bag, she'd be lost. Mrs. Greenhut and Miss Levesque being coffee drinkers were, like the rest of that vast, insensitive tribe, prone to foist their own vulgar tastes upon others.

"Lover," she went on huskily, "why don't you marry me? Then that Greenhut woman would never bother you again. She has old-fashioned ideas of morality and would never dream of coming between a husband and wife . . . as, of course, is only right and proper."

"I can't marry you, Désirée," he said through a mouthful of crumbs, "because I love Gertrude. And I can't marry Gertrude because I love you. Both of you have been feeding me so many love potions that I suspect you've ruined my digestion entirely."

"I'll bet, if you were left to yourself, you wouldn't marry either of us," Miss Levesque said darkly. Ernest chewed cookie crumbs and swallowed them without commenting.

"I've seen you giving the eye to that little blonde trollop who moved in the other week," she went on. "Nasty little foreigner. If there's one thing I can't stand, it's foreigners. If you ask me, a lot of these so-called refugees didn't escape from their countries—more likely, they were *asked* to leave." Miss Levesque glared at him disapprovingly. "*Refugee!*"

The idea of calling that angelic creature a trollop! To think that there was any country, any place or any one that did not find her desirable! But he must conceal his interest, or poor Nadia might find herself the innocent victim of some particularly unpleasant spell. It was for this praiseworthy reason that he had been avoiding her. Several times, in fact, he had actually lifted his hand to knock on her door and ask her to share a dish of tea with him, and each time he'd stifled the impulse.

"I only know her to say hello to," he protested, licking the last crumb off his mouth. That was almost true, but there are hellos and hellos. "Besides, I'm getting sick of all women. If I ever can get away from you two, I think I ought to join a monastery." He

looked up at her anxiously, to make sure she recognized a joke.

MISS Levesque smiled slyly. "And what makes you think we can't get into a monastery? Oh, Gertrude and I have had some jolly times together before you came between us."

"I certainly never *wanted* to come between you," Ernest muttered. Blast the day he'd accepted this woman's offer to help him decorate his apartment. Simply because she looked an artistic type! He should have known that it's usually the artistic types who are the most passionate and besides, she had proved to have terrible taste. He'd even been lucky that she'd let him put his Hokasais away in the closet instead of in the wastepaper basket.

"I'll gladly step aside!" he went on eagerly. "I realize that true friendship is far more important than—"

"Don't be ridiculous. It isn't. Nothing in the world is more important than the love of a man for a woman. And vice versa." She flung her arms wide. "Come, embrace me, Ernest, with ardor tempered by tenderness."

"I already told you why not," he repeated, annoyed. "You're dripping with ink."

"Of course," she agreed, sounding regretful. "I quite forgot—I always get carried away by the

intoxication of your presence, sweetie." Ernest repressed a shudder, remembering times when this had actually happened. On one such occasion, he hadn't been able to distinguish between Foochow and Faggot for days afterward.

She blew him a kiss. "I'll just float upstairs and change. Then, maybe, I'll put a spell on that Greenhut creature, if I can think of something really horrid. See you later, lover."

"Good-by," Ernest said. "Nice of you to drop in," he added perfunctorily. It was safest to be especially polite to these—women. They became provoked so easily. That's how he'd lost his best Chinese hoccarro teapot.

As soon as she'd disappeared, he grabbed his hat, adjusted his muffler—for the early spring day could be treacherous—and made for the door. He had been abstinent far too long—he must have his *tea!* Although he made an infinitely better cup himself, at least he'd be relatively safe from all undesired attentions in Schrafft's. Neither of the ladies liked to make a public spectacle of herself if it could be avoided.

Besides, they couldn't really object to his taking a quiet drink alone—although he remembered the time well, when he had tried to go downtown to taste a break of fully fine Oolong that had just arrived from Formosa, on an after-

noon that Désirée had intended to spend with him! It had been a long time since he'd been allowed to have so much as a thought, let alone an action, of his own contriving. He might as well be dead. After all, didn't the old myth say tea-tasters always died young? His time had come, and it was probably none too soon.

HE flung himself down the stairs in a burst of energy that, he hoped, would provide enough momentum to carry him past any unseen impediments at the door. As he bounded off the bottom step, he collided with something warm and soft and sweetly scented, like extra high-grade Pouchong. "I'm terribly sorry," he apologized, reluctantly releasing the girl from the embrace in which he somehow found himself holding her. "I hope I didn't hurt you, Miss Koldunya."

"You did not hurt me by the runnings into me," she smiled, adjusting the small fur hat on her smooth, shining ash-blonde hair. "And I am very happy to see you, even if you are seeing me only to be knocking me down. Almost knocking me down," she added—for she was apparently a stickler for accuracy.

"Yes . . . well," Ernest said, gazing apprehensively over his shoulder at what seemed to be a shadow in the upstairs hall, "I must be running off. Awfully nice seeing

you, Miss Koldunya . . .”

“Are you making an avoidance of me, Mr. Fitch?” she asked, looking directly into his eyes. “You seemed so friendly when first we encountered. I thought you were interesting in me. Since then you have performed so coldly, so strangely. Have I done anythings—said anythings?”

In her earnestness, she placed a small, suede-gloved hand upon his arm. The glow he derived from the contact was very different from any of the sensations the ladies upstairs could evoke in him at their pleasure, although it was undoubtedly the kind they would have liked to be able to arouse. This was, he feared, the *real thing*.

But it was not to be. It was too late. He was doomed.

“Have I? Yes? No?” she persisted.

“Eh? Oh, yes—er—no. I really must be going,” he said desperately. “Not a moment to lose. A matter of life and death.”

“Where *are* you going?” she asked with disarming directness. Her large, luminous eyes looked at him intently.

How could he lie to *her*? “I’m going to Schrafft’s for a cup of tea,” he blurted.

“Good, good!” she said gaily. “I am absolutely attenuated from thirstiness. I will go along with you, and you will buy me also a drink, if you will be so kindly.”

He couldn’t refuse a request like that. But would *they*—he glanced fearfully upstairs—understand? They would not.

“Miss Koldunya—Nadia!” he declared, taking both her vibrant hands in his. “You mustn’t come with me. You’ll be in terrible danger if you do.”

She freed her hands, and he felt a deep, physical sense of loss. “Why, Ernest, how melodramatically you are sounding. Like the cinema almost. You excite my inquiry.”

“You don’t understand—danger!” he babbled.

She moved away slightly and looked at him with a sad little smile. “I—I am not understanding what danger is? *Ha!*” She laughed and, at last, he understood what a mirthless laugh was. “Haplessly, you do not know where I am coming from. I am a refugee—what is the euphemism?—a dispersed people. I have no country any more, no families, nothing. I am escaping from Eastern Europe underneath rather displeasing conditions.”

SHE shuddered and he shivered in sympathy. Poor little creature—she needed a man to protect her after all she’d been through. He flexed the muscles that lay dormant beneath the Brooks Brothers’ suit.

“I am assuring you, Ernest, danger is an elderly acquaintance

of mine." She shrugged her shoulders. "However, if you are not wishful to buy me a beverage, it is completely all right. I understand. I have been too forward. It is not the costum here for the womens to make the askings." She turned her face away.

"No, you *don't* understand!" Ernest protested, in spite of himself. "I *do* want to buy you a beverage. More than anything else in the world. Only—oh, what's the use? Please *do* come," he said recklessly.

Immediately, Nadia was as gay again as if she had suffered no rebuff. He swung open the heavy door of the old brownstone. Outside, spring lay bright over the shabby, nondescript street, but the sun's rays halted sharply at the gloomy entry, almost as if there were some barrier there. He felt that he too would be unable to cross that threshold, that he could not go out to meet the sun. And he felt very sorry for poor Ernest Fitch, doomed to stay forever in this gloomy brownstone, unable to taste the delights of Uji Yamashiro and Nadia's smile.

Then Nadia gave him her hand and they were out of the house, clattering down the steps . . . and actually on the sidewalk at last.

The very matter-of-factness of the street was enormously appealing to him, enhanced as it was by the sun's yellow rays, which

illuminated each homely garbage can with loving solicitude and left shimmering highlights in Nadia's long, pale hair—the exact color of Moyune Gunpowder—which the gentle breeze left undisturbed.

Feeling the warm sunlight on his face, listening to the girl's pleasantly innocuous prattle, he could hardly believe that, for the last two months, he had actually been undergoing such improbable experiences. For a moment, he felt relaxed and free and was moved to lift his voice in a Japanese teaplankers' song. "*Natsu mo*," he caroled, "*chikazuku Hachi-Ju-Hachi-Ya . . .*"

And then he stopped short. Why was it that, although there was no one near them in the street, he could hear footsteps following them very distinctly?

THE girl continued her cheerful chattering all the way, not seeming to notice the glances he kept throwing over his shoulder. But then, of course, if she came from behind the Iron Curtain, she would accept this as perfectly conventional behavior.

She told him how lucky she had been, as a foreigner of suspect nationality, to get a job as a school 'psychologist.' "Do you not think it fascinating to work with childrens, Ernest? To assist shaping their little minds as they make development? It is a wonderful

privilege and a tremense responsibility."

"Er—ah—yes, children," Ernest agreed, wondering perhaps whether he'd only imagined the sound of footsteps behind them. Mrs. Greenhut and Miss Levesque couldn't be watching him *all* the time. It was hard to distinguish between imagination and reality, when the latter was so much the more fantastic of the two. Yet, if he reasoned the matter out, he would know that Mrs. Greenhut and Miss Levesque undoubtedly had far more efficient methods of transportation than mere walking. What was that flash in the air over his head?

"Children," he repeated, comprehending that he was not making any notable contribution to the conversation. "Nice—er—children. Here's Schrafft's." And he plunged into its comfortingly murky interior, leaving Nadia to make her own way after him.

A swanlike hostess swam up to them, greeted Ernest with approval, regarded Nadia with hauteur and turned them both over to a waitress with the cryptic command, "Two."

"We'd like a table in a corner, where I can keep my back to the wall." Ernest turned on a charming smile. "I—I'm susceptible to chills in my back," he explained.

"Ha!" Nadia observed enigmatically.

"Two teas, please," he said to the waitress, when she had seated them in the darkest corner, "and two orders of tea sandwiches."

"Please to serving me in a glass, accompanied by two slices of lemming," Nadia demanded, stripping off her gloves with great deliberation. "Recollect that the water must be at the absolutely bubbly boil—and *no* little bandages around the tea!"

"But we *always* serve tea in bags, madam," the waitress protested, aghast, looking to Ernest for moral support.

"Not to me you are serving bandaged tea," Nadia said, looking the girl firmly in the eye. "And I am wanting a dish of preserves on the side. Any flavoring," she added graciously, "except quincy."

"But—yes, madam," the waitress said, a glazed look in her eyes. "Right away, madam."

"Er—I'll have my tea without a tea bag too," Ernest said feebly, marveling at Nadia's boldness in daring to beard Schrafft's. "But in a pot, not a glass. And with milk!"

NADIA snorted, as the waitress moved off. "Milk! An illegitimate innovation. Did you not know that milk is not being pushed into tea until 1680 A.D.? And it was some womans from West Europe who is doing this terrible thing—of course."

"There have been improvements

in many things since 1680," retorted Ernest, pleased to find himself still capable of argument. "The tea industry is continually progressing. After all, we don't flavor tea with ginger, onion or orange any more, do we?"

"You are never knowing in plenty restaurants," Nadia said. "Anybodies who is strangling their tea through bandagings have ability of anythings."

"Milk not only mellows the taste," Ernest explained, "but it prevents the tannin in tea from injuring the digestive organs."

Nadia drew out a long, gold-tipped cigarette and handed Ernest a lighter. "You are knowing considerable about the tea, Ernest." Her skin, he thought, was like the petals of a tea blossom which is, of course, of the same genus as the camellia.

"Well, I'm in the tea business," he explained.

"So, that is how you earn your existence? What are you doing particularly?"

"I'm a tea-taster," he said. "I can blend too—" He jumped up as a shadow fell upon him.

It was only the waitress, bearing a tray which contained a glass of tea and a pot of tea and a jug of hot water and a dish of lemon slices and a dish of strawberry jam and a jug of milk and two large dishes containing immense quantities of sandwiches. Schrafft's had

never done him so proud before. He could see Nadia knew her way around tearooms.

The waitress went away, and Nadia put a warm hand on his. He could feel tangible reassurance rising from it. She was a nice kind of girl to have around. Soothing.

"What is the matter, Ernest?" she asked. "You are trembling like an aspic. Is it that the secret police are trailing after you, yes?"

He was momentarily shocked out of his apprehension. "The police! Certainly *not*—I've never done anything wrong in my life."

"You certainly do look as if somebodies were haunting you," she said, sipping her tea and making a face. "Why you are not disclosing to me about it, if only for the therapeutic value of confession?"

WHY shouldn't he? Perhaps he would feel better if he could confide in someone — and who would be better for him to unbosom himself to than this lovely, sympathetic, altogether understanding girl? Besides, moral duty required him to warn her of the terrible danger she was exposing herself to by associating with him.

He looked around furtively to make sure they were not overheard. "As a matter of fact, there is somebody after me. But it's not the police—it's witches."

Nadia's expression was so well

trained that the sudden gleam of clinical interest in her eyes was barely perceptible. "My poor Ernest," she said, patting his hand. "My poor, paranoid Ernest."

He pulled his hand away. "You don't *believe* me!" It had simply not occurred to him that she would not believe him. Previously, of course, he himself had not believed in witches, but, now that he knew them to be factual entities, he expected her to accept his word. Couldn't she tell he was sincere? But it probably wasn't his sincerity she doubted, he realized—it was more likely his sanity.

"You don't believe there are witches?" he questioned with less assurance.

"For sure, there are witches," she said, eating a sandwich. "The middle-aged stereotype of the witch is only an unconscious symbolization of one's own guilt-feelings, a projectioning of them upon other peoples. You were saying before that never you had doing anythings wrong in your life. To the trained psychologist, such a statement is fraught with significance. It—"

"But these aren't medieval witches," he interrupted. "They're modern, contemporary witches. They live upstairs from me. From you, too," he added, to drive the matter home. "Mrs. Greenhut owns the house."

"Regressioning to the fantasy

world of your childhoodness," she added kindly. "Not an uncommon dynamism, for sure, but potentially dangerous."

Nadia didn't seem to understand at all what he meant. He tried again. "You know Mrs. Greenhut and Miss Levesque? They're witches, I tell you."

"If they are witches, pigeon, why is it that they are seeming to me simplicitly just a coupling of nice, dull, medieval-aged womens?"

ERNEST thought he heard a hiss in the air and fervently hoped he was wrong. "Because the higher type witch doesn't advertise herself—that's why," he explained triumphantly. "Both of them told me so. Separately, of course, because they haven't spoken to each other—politely, anyhow—since I moved into the house. They don't want anything out of you, so why should they let you in on their secret?"

"Well, then, what is it so especially they are wanting out of *you*, Ernest?"

"They are wanting . . . they want to marry me," he said sulkily, wishing she would stop chewing when he spoke to her.

"Oh, Ernest!" she said, with her mouth full. "That is to project, indeed. You probably are imagining every womans you meet is wanting to marry you or somethings, that you are an irresistible

fellow. Wish-fulfillmenting to almost pathological degree, as a resulting of thwarted developments of ego neediness." She gestured with an oversized tea sandwich. "I am loathsome to say this, Ernest, but I am fearful you are showing evidence of deep emotional maladjustment."

"I do *not* think every woman wants to marry me," Ernest protested, casting an involuntary glance at himself in the mirror set in the wooden paneling over the table. Catching her eye, he flushed.

"Tea must be brewed by now," he muttered, lifting the lid and peering into the pot. "One of the worst things about tea bags," he added absently, "is that they keep you from seeing the agony of the leaves."

"The *which*, Ernest?"

He smiled. "No, I'm not betraying any more interesting symptoms. That's a tea-tasting term—means the unfolding of the leaves when boiling water's poured on them."

She leaned over and looked curiously into the pot. The odor of jasmine that arose from her was almost overpowering. He would have enjoyed taking her in his arms. "It is looking to me as if somebodies put those leaves out of their agony much time ago," she observed.

She sat back and let Ernest light another cigarette for her. "Better imbibe it, pigeon. Even torpid tea

is stimulating and will have a favorable p-sychological affection upon you."

"You're quite right about that, you know," he agreed. "There was an article on the subject in the London *Lancet* sometime in the eighteen-sixties. Something about tea having a strange influence over mood, a strange power of changing the look of things, and changing it for the better, so that we can believe and hope and do, under the influence of tea, what we should otherwise give up in discouragement and despair."

HE poured the amber fluid into his cup and sipped. "Not too good a blend for hard water," he commented. And then, "I don't suppose you could expect much of a nose."

She blew a cloud of smoke and smiled at him. "Well, pigeon, have the lookings of things changed strangely for the betterment?"

He looked at her calmly. "You know, Nadia, Mrs. Greenhut and Miss Levesque are real witches. They cast spells on me and force me to do whatever they want. You psychologists are too much inclined to consider everything outside the range of your own textbooks as either nonexistent or unimportant. I tell you those were genuine spells."

"Compulsions, Ernest," she corrected him, eating a spoonful of

jam, "not spells. And it is you who are casting them upon yourself." She daintily licked the spoon clean.

"But they do all sorts of odd and inexplicable things," he protested. "I've seen them with my own eyes."

"You cannot always be trustful of your own eyes," she observed, wavering between two equally attractive sandwiches. "Obviously, you are demonstrative of typical phobic reactings. Some traumatic experiencing in your childhoodness is undoubtedly responsive for your presently maladjustive behaviorism."

"Maloo mixture!" Ernest snapped. He drank more tea. "They feed me love potions all the time," he said, flatly irritated at her narrow-mindedness. "I am madly in love with both of them."

She smiled, for a moment the woman, rather than the 'p-sychologist.' "If these so-said love potations are officious, pigeon," she said coyly, "how is it you are imbibing here with me and not with your witch friends, eh?" She glanced at the mirror and nodded her head, apparently feeling that what she saw there answered her question completely.

"Now," she went on briskly, once more the scientist, "you must not be evasive, Ernest. You must facing around your problems squarely and apply the intelligent-

ness and rationalize analysizing to them. Why should two respectful medieval womens be using witchcraftiness to making you marry them?"

"And who do you think you're calling an elderly woman, slut?" shrieked Miss Levesque disrespectfully, as her cavernous head rose out of a crust on the table before them. "I'll give you just one second to clear out of here, baby, and leave my Ernest alone, before I let you have it!"

"*Your Ernest!*" stated a voice from the air, for Mrs. Greenhut wouldn't have dreamed of materializing in Schrafft's wearing a housedress. "You have some nerve! *Your Ernest*, indeed!"

And Miss Levesque's long, lank, black hair stood tautly on end, as if some invisible hand were tugging at it. She gave vent to prolonged and uninhibited ululation.

"*There!*" Ernest said triumphantly. "Who's having hallucinations now?"

NAĐA raised bland blue eyes to his. "What are you intending to tell me, Ernest?" she asked, nibbling a piece of date-nut bread.

He pointed with a trembling finger. "D-don't you see Miss Levesque's head in the middle of the table?"

"A head in the middle of the



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ta— Oh, Ernest, this hallucinating is of uttermost seriousness. You are betraying prominent schizophrenic tendencies."

Miss Levesque's hair suddenly subsided in limp streaks over her bony face, as the invisible power holding it relaxed its grip. "She's a liar," she declared angrily, blowing the hair out of her way. "Just pretending not to see me out of spite, the little trollop!"

"Maybe there's something wrong with her eyes," Ernest put in anxiously. "Nadia, have you ever tried sleeping on a pillow stuffed with tea leaves? It's an old Chinese remedy for eye trouble."

"*Ha!*" Nadia smiled seductively at him. "If you are really desiring to know what my pillows are being stuffed with, why don't you—"

"Listen here, you little . . ." Miss Levesque began, in a voice choked with wrath.

The waitress approached the table apprehensively. "Anything else, sir?" she asked, keeping her eyes on her apron. "M-madam?"

Ernest greeted her arrival with enthusiasm. "Miss, what do you see on top of this cruet?"

The girl knitted her brows and bent herself to the problem. "I see oil, vinegar and mustard," she replied conscientiously. "Did you want ketchup? For tea?"

"In Bokhara," Nadia pointed out, pensively ladling jam into her tea, "they are flavoring tea with

mutton fat. After they have drunken it, then they are eating the leaves. Very economical, those Bokharans."

"Ugh," observed Mrs. Greenhut's voice.

"I imagine ketchup in tea would be more like *letpet*," Ernest commented. "Did you know they pickle tea in Burma?" he asked the waitress.

"N-no, sir," the girl said, clutching her tray to her bosom.

"They make a salad out of it, with garlic, oil and, occasionally, dried fish. It's a great treat—they eat it only on holidays and special occasions."

"I don't believe a word of it," stated Miss Levesque's head flatly.

"You don't?" Ernest was angry. "I suppose you don't believe that in Siam they chew tea mixed with salt and garlic or hog fat?"

Nadia opened her beautiful eyes wide. "Why, I *do* believe you, Ernest."

"I don't!" snapped Miss Levesque. "He's making it all up."

"I would like a large further quantity of little sandywitches," Nadia interrupted, licking jam from her full pink mouth, "and another glass of what I am very politely calling tea, if you will be so pleasing."

THE waitress looked at her coldly. "Those little sandwiches have an awful lot of calories."

"I don't have to worrying about my outline," Nadia confided with a complacent smile. "I can eating all I want and it keeps staying just as nicely. I am a lucky girl, no?"

"Something to do with your glands, prob'ly," the waitress sniffed.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised," Mrs. Greenhut's voice agreed.

"Miss," Ernest insisted. "Don't you see a head on the table?"

The waitress's eyes widened and she backed away. "Schrafft's don't like for you to spike your tea," she protested, all gentility lost.

"He has not put any spokes in the tea," Nadia explained, blowing smoke in the girl's face. "He is just thinking he is funny."

"Oh," the girl said feebly. "Ha, ha! Heads on the table," she repeated, laughing more conscientiously as she thought of her tip. "Ha, ha! That's a good one—I must tell the cashier."

"You can *perfectly well* see me!" put in Miss Levesque angrily. "You're lying too. It's all part of a plot."

"Your spells aren't strong enough, dear," another smug voice said from the air. "But it isn't your fault. You just can't do any better. You can hear *me* all right, can't you, young woman?"

"Another pot of tea for you, sir?"

Ernest nodded. "Better make it a double one," he said weakly.

"Young woman!" the voice from the air spoke again. "Will you kindly answer me when I address you? I declare, I don't know what the younger generation is coming to these days!"

THE girl picked up her tray and walked away, looking over her shoulder and giggling every time she caught Nadia's eye.

"Why are you looking so funnily, Ernest?" Nadia asked, spooning up the remainder of the jam greedily.

"She—she didn't see her," Ernest quavered. "She didn't hear either of them."

"Oh, dear!" Nadia sighed. "Auditorium *and* visual hallucinations both. Now, listening to me, Ernest. She is not seeing or hearing them because they are existing only inside your mind."

"Now, that's silly!" he said indignantly. "How can Mrs. Greenhut and Miss Levesque possibly exist only inside my mind? You must have seen both of them. They have their names over the mailboxes and everything." He tried to gulp some tea, but it was cold and tasted of dead fish.

"For sure they have real existence," Nadia said impatiently, "but they are not witches. They are simplicitly a coupling of harmless old womens whom you are fancifuling to be witches. The reality-irreality continuum is—"

"Harmless old woman!" Mrs. Greenhut's voice shrilled. "I'll show the little hussy who's old—and harmless," she added ominously. "Hit her, Ernest. Hit her right in that pasty painted face of hers."

ERNEST'S right arm swung out ahead of him. He struggled to gain control, even though he knew it would be impossible. Mrs. Greenhut had taken charge. Disregarding the wishes of its owner, the arm reached toward Nadia's lovely face. He watched with detached horror as his hand hovered in the air before her dainty nose. Then the stiff fingers relaxed and stroked her cheek clumsily.

"Why, Ernest!" Nadia giggled, patting his hand. "Already we are establishing rapport!"

"Ernest!" Mrs. Greenhut's voice emitted visible sparks. "I said *hit* her!"

"I can't," he replied, rolling his eyes up toward the point from which her voice seemed to originate. "I didn't want to, but I tried, and I couldn't!"

Nadia gripped his hand tensely. She was surprisingly strong. "Ernest, you are talking with much incoherence. I am worrying intensively over you. You are now being demonstrative of hebephrenic symptomatology." Her eyes were intent on his.

"I don't understand it!" Mrs.

Greenhut wailed. "It's downright uncanny—that's what it is."

"Leggo his hand, you little tart," Miss Levesque snarled, "or you'll be plenty sorry!"

The waitress arrived with fresh tea and sandwiches. "I brought you some more jam, miss," she said defiantly. "But don't blame me if it sticks to your hips."

She departed. "There will be no jamb on my hips, pigeon," Nadia assured Ernest. "You will see."

"Watch me, Gertrude!" Miss Levesque commanded desperately. "This time, I'll show the heavenly little wench she can't ignore *me!*"

The glass of tea zoomed up from the table and hung upside down over Nadia's gleaming head. It descended a fraction of an inch in a vacillating sort of way. Then it halted and remained immobile in mid-air, not a drop of the tawny liquid emerging to dampen the chic little mink cap.

"Nadia!" Ernest screeched. "Look out!"

"Look out for what, pigeon?" she asked, removing the top from a sandwich and peering inside to see whether she approved of the filling.

"Your tea! It's hanging over your head. And I wish you'd stop eating all the time I'm talking to you!"

"Please do not be ridiculous, Ernest. My tea—if you are calling it tea—is right here in my hand."

What is more, you are much uncouthly."

She sipped her tea. Ernest looked to see whether there might be two glasses, but the air above her head was empty.

NADIA leaned forward, frowning anxiously. "Ernest, cannot you envision for yourself that there is something very wrongly amiss with you? Normal running-with-the-mill peoples are not believing in witches any more—you know that."

She gestured toward the roomful of stout matrons contentedly and obliviously having their afternoon tea. "None of them is envisioning anything exceptional. You are manifestating p-sychotic divergencies from the group thinking. Ergo, you are suffering from the delusions. You see?"

"I wonder whether I've been drinking too much tea," he mused. "An excess of any stimulant may very well prove deleterious to the nervous system."

"Good tea," Nadia said, "never hurt any bodies. You must come to my apartment, and I will show you some good tea from my samovar. I will also show you other things."

"*Delusions!*" wailed Miss Levesque's head. "But I happen to know for a fact that we aren't delusions! We're real. I simply cannot understand why you don't see me, or

hear either of us. I don't know why everything is going wrong unless . . ."

". . . unless," Mrs. Greenhut's voice took up the sentence grimly, "she's a more powerful witch than either one of us. Let's face it, Désirée, that's just about the only logical explanation. There's a lot of talent for this sort of thing in Eastern Europe."

A brief baffled silence ensued. Ernest cleared his throat. "Now, look here!" he said firmly. Nadia and Miss Levesque looked at him, and he could sense Mrs. Greenhut's steady stare. Under their combined gazes, he felt like a tea leaf uncurling underneath the onslaught of the boiling water. "Er—ah—yes," he said.

"Have some more tea, Ernest," Nadia said softly.

"Gertrude," Miss Levesque said, with plaintive determination, "we were once friends. For old times' sake . . ."

". . . we must unite against the common enemy," Mrs. Greenhut finished for her. "Just what I was thinking myself. Now, Désirée, we must act together. One—two—three —Go!"

And Ernest found his legs propelling him past the other tables, past the cashier at a great rate, and out of Schrafft's at an even faster pace.

Then he was swooping into a postcard blue sky.

ERNEST zoomed up the street, but he had none of the delicious sense of flying that one has in dreams. He felt simply as if he were being pushed and pulled and hauled and mauled, but he knew enough not to struggle. They were perfectly capable of dropping him, inadvertently of course, but motives never count for much in the ultimate run. He closed his eyes and hoped he was not going to be seasick. An experience like this could damage his palate permanently.

The little aerial cortège finally halted outside the windows of his apartment. Few second-floor tenants are given the privilege of viewing their dwellings from this angle, but Ernest, fluttering wildly in the air, failed to appreciate his position.

"Heavens to Betsy!" he heard Mrs. Greenhut's exasperated voice exclaim. "I should have remembered that these foolish windows have to be opened from the inside! Can you hold him all by yourself, Dési, while I dissolve them?"

"All right, Gertie," Miss Levesque said almost amiably, "but hurry." Ernest felt himself shifted into an even more precarious balance and repressed a faint moan. "He's no lightweight, especially after all those cookies and things you kept on feeding him—and all that tea he's been swilling."

"I'm going as fast as I can."

Mrs. Greenhut retorted, "and please don't chatter. How can anybody work a good spell if you fuss, fuss, fuss? Be *careful!*" she shrieked, as Ernest started to slip from the invisible grasp in which he was insecurely held.

He gave a yelp as he plummeted downward.

"I've got him," Miss Levesque yelled triumphantly. Ernest could feel a bony hand twisting his jacket all out of shape. "But do hurry. We may not be able to put him together again if he gets smashed. At least, not in the same way. And I happen to like this particular arrangement."

Slowly—too slowly—the window liquefied and Ernest was inserted in the resultant aperture, one invisible lady pushing him, the other pulling. They dumped him on the rug, where he lay panting, unable to get up and not particularly wanting to anyway.

"Well, Ernest!" Nadia said, putting *Vogue* back on the marble top of the coffee table. "It's approximately the time for you to revert." She was sitting comfortably before the fireplace, her legs crossed to reveal a pair of handsomely filled nylons. "I do not think it was very couth of you to arise and digress in such a fashion, leaving me to settle for the account, including the teacup you sequestered."

"Teacup?" Ernest said vaguely.



THE AGONY OF THE LEAVES

He looked at his hand and there, sure enough, was a teacup with tea surprisingly in it. He'd never be able to show his face in Schrafft's again.

"Still," she added more gently, "I had fear you might perhaps be troubled, so I came to make an investigation."

"I—I didn't—I didn't get up and walk out! How can you say such a thing? I was being forced out. You must have seen me."

She shook her head slowly and sadly. There was a feeling of intense loneliness at the pit of his stomach.

Underneath the smart hat, the face of the model on the cover of the magazine looked strangely like Miss Levesque's. "Go on, ask her how she got in the door?" she demanded. "Or have you been giving out duplicate keys, Ernest?"

"Certainly not!" he said firmly. "I wouldn't dream of—well, I wouldn't *do* it anyway. Nadia," he asked obediently, "how did you get into my apartment?"

She helped herself to some cashews from a T'ang bowl on the table and raised her eyebrows. "Why, you are leaving the door unjarred, so I am ingestting. I did not think you would be objectioning."

"I'm not—no—of course—I—oh, hell, I don't know what's happening to me," he declared miserably, shifting to a more comfortable

position on the rug. "What's more, I'm beginning not to care. This is all just too much. I'm glad tea-tasters never live to grow old. I'm glad, I'm *glad!*"

THREE was a look of concern on Nadia's face. "But you are sickly, pigeon," she murmured, getting up. "You do look rather pallorous. Haplessly I am running you amuck, with too much analysis all in concert. I am undermining you, forcing you into apatheticity."

She went over to him and stroked his head with cool, comforting fingers. "I am so sorrowful, pigeon," she cooed. "I would not for all the hemisphere want to hurting you. All I am wishful to infect is a restoration of the integration of your personality resourcefulness. In other words—" and she gave him a long, lingering look out of her cobalt eyes—"I am just wanting to make you happy. Come down and see my samovar."

"I can't," he said wretchedly. The old spells were on him again. "They won't let me. You know they won't let me."

"I will boil some waters and make you a tea right here then," she announced. "In a cup," she concluded magnanimously.

"I have tea already," he said, and took a slug from the Schrafft brew, which strangely seemed to have retained its heat although it was flat and stale. "Nadia," he

asked, looking bleakly up at the girl, "tell me—are *you* a witch also?"

She sat down, cross-legged, beside him on the rug. "So you are one of those peoples who are terminating analysis as *witch-doctors*, yes?"

He shook his head. "Not a *witch-doctor*—only *witch*."

She shrugged. "If there are being witches," she said gaily, "then I dare to say that you could name a *p-sychologist* or a *p-sychoanalyst* one, as much as any other scientific population. But, Ernest, we *know* there are being no such creations existing today. This is a hard-hitted, rationalizing society."

There was a knock at the door. "Excuse me," Ernest said politely, scrambling to his feet. "I'd better open it, or else."

"Good afternoon, Ernest dear," smiled Mrs. Greenhut. For the occasion, she had changed her house-dress to a snug black crêpe, ornamented by a rope of pearls. "May I come in?"

He stood aside silently, knowing that, if she wanted in, she would come in. He had fought her—both of them—at first, and it had been painful and humiliating and useless.

"Why, if it isn't Miss Koldunya from downstairs," Mrs. Greenhut said graciously. "How do you do, my dear?"

Nadia got up from the rug and

brushed the well-shaped back of her skirt painstakingly. "How are you doing?" she replied, after a pause just long enough to be insolent.

"Ha, so you *do* see me!" Mrs. Greenhut snapped, abruptly shedding her company manners. "You admit it!"

Nadia looked with meaning at Mrs. Greenhut's portly form. "How could anybodies be not seeing you?" she asked pleasantly.

MRS. Greenhut turned a mottled red and began to swell like a balloon. Ernest watched, fascinated, as the seams of the black crêpe visibly stretched further than any normal seam ever could.

Then Mrs. Greenhut controlled herself with a visible effort and bared her teeth in a vicious social smile. "Since you seem to be trying to *delude* this poor, dear boy into believing that there are no such beings as witches, Miss Koldunya, how do you explain the fact that I, an ordinary, harmless woman, came into the room through the *closet*?" she demanded triumphantly. "You have the apartment on the ground floor, where the layout is slightly different," she continued, "so of course you didn't know his front door was on the other side of the foyer."

"Closet!" Nadia raised her eyebrows. "You are coming in through the closet? But, admissib-

ly, that is a common thing to be doing. Nice people are not injecting themselves via closets."

She crossed over to the door through which Mrs. Greenhut had entered and flung it open. The outside hall was clearly visible beyond.

Nadia smiled. "I am fearful you must have mistaken yourself, Mrs. Greenhut. This—" she opened what Ernest had always thought to be his front door—"is the closet."

And so it was. Ernest gulped a draught of tea. Pushing him around was bad enough, but he did not like having his closet displaced. Was nothing sacred to these women?

"What pretty depictions!" he heard Nadia exclaim. "All about Japanese peoples imbibing teas. Why are you not dangling them from the walls, Ernest, instead of hoodwinking them in a closet?"

"I'll bet you think you're pretty smart!" Miss Levesque growled, oozing out of the coffee table in a purple velvet gown. "Still claim you can't see me, baby?"

"Oh, I am seeing you very much indeed," Nadia replied, taking a mint from a Satsuma *gusuri chawan* on the piano. "You ingressed with this other womans. It is always nice for womans of a certain age to have friendshipmates of their own sex—it makes compensation for their not abling to distract other sex."

"Don't pull that on us, you—you *witch!*" Miss Levesque snarled.

"Ah, she is wielding the word in a colloquial sense, no?" Nadia observed to Ernest, with an air of enlightenment. "Mayhaps she is not as I diagnosized. She is signifying only that—"

"She is using the word quite literally," Mrs. Greenhut corrected. "*I* am a witch — *you* are a witch — *she* is a witch."

"My English is truly very bad," Nadia admitted. "I am so full of gratitudeness for this lesson."

"We are *so* witches!" Miss Levesque shrieked, bursting into angry tears. She stamped her foot on the rug. "We are *so—we are—we are so!*"

"Désirée!" Mrs. Greenhut commanded. "Control yourself!"

BREATHING hard, Miss Levesque fanned herself with *Some Chinese Ghosts*.

"*Ha!*" Nadia said, comprehension appearing to dawn in her lovely eyes. "My poor Ernest," she apologized, "I have made a great fallacy about you. I admit it happily. It is not you who are frustrating—it is these two old witches. Sex-starved old haggises, who will use any means to acquisitioning themselves a mans, even if they are having to hypnotize him and themselves, into fancifulling they are using witchcraftiness to secure him."

"Sex-starved!" Mrs. Greenhut gasped indignantly. "A decent young woman wouldn't *dream* of using language like that!"

"Who said she was a decent young woman?" sobbed Miss Levesque. "It's my belief she's nothing better than a—"

Ernest tossed off the rest of his tea and got to his feet. "Look here," he said firmly. "I won't have you talking about Nadia like that. And take your paws off that book, you! It's a valuable first edition."

Lafcadio Hearn fell to the carpet with a dull thunk. All three women turned to him with startled expressions on their faces. "Whether all this witchcraft is imaginary or not," he continued, pleased to see that Nadia looked as incredulous as the others, "you ought to be ashamed of yourselves—all three of you."

"Me as well?" Nadia asked in a small voice. "Not *me*, Ernest?"

"You too—you haven't been behaving one bit better than the others. And you should know better, too, because you've had the advantage of a better education."

He scratched his head. "I guess I just happen to like you, although heaven knows why, because you've been treating me like an idiot also."

"It's not *heaven* that knows why you like her," Mrs. Greenhut commented.

"If she is a witch," Ernest said, whirling upon her, "at least she had the grace not to *tell* me that she was feeding me love potions or practicing her wiles upon me. So, if I'm in love with her, there's a fighting chance that it was my own idea as well as hers. What's more, she shares my interests—or, at least, she's taken the trouble to bone up on them. She's very sound on tea—and she wouldn't dream of trying to make me drink *coffee*!" He spat out the word contemptuously.

"Well, we're at least frank," Miss Levesque pouted. "Don't you believe in the virtue of candor?"

"I happen," Ernest said spirit-edly, testing the return of his independence, "to be a perfectly normal and conventional member of society, in spite of both of you—and you, *pigeon*." He bowed toward Nadia. "And, as a perfectly normal and conventional member of society, I *like* hypocrisy—it is the basis of all civilized behavior."

"Bourgeois mentality," sniffed Nadia.

"Witchcraft," said Mrs. Greenhut.

Ernest grinned. "I'm not so sure it's all witchcraft," he said, giving Nadia a head-to-foot glance that should have made her blush, but didn't. "Look at her face and figure—*those* aren't witchcraft."

"Oh, no?" Mrs. Greenhut said meaningfully.

"All right then, if it's witchcraft, why didn't you use some of it? At least she's got better taste than either of you two. And uses more up-to-date methods. I'm all in favor of such progress."

"*Ernest!*" Miss Levesque howled. "How can you *say* things like that about us? After all you and I have been to one another!"

ERNEST prudently affected not to hear this. "Either Nadia's just an ordinary girl. I mean," he added hastily, catching her eye, "an extraordinary girl, but without any supernormal powers. Or else she's a more capable witch than the two of you put together. If she's just a—girl—and it's the power of true love that's made me able to resist you two, then that's fine. And if she's a witch, why, it seems I like her blend of tricks better than yours."

"*Ernest!*" Nadia exclaimed, overcome by emotion. "Those are the nicest things anybodies is ever saying to me without compulsiveness."

"What's more," Ernest concluded, taking her hand, "whatever she is, I'm going to marry her, so the two of you might just as well leave now." He lifted her hand to his lips. "Momikiri," he murmured. "That's the name of a high-grade Japanese blend of tea. It also means 'pretty fingers.'"

Nadia giggled coyly.

"*Pipsqueak!*" Mrs. Greenhut commented rancorously. "There're a thousand boys better looking, better everything than you. You were just convenient — that's all."

"Living in the same house and all," Miss Levesque explained, still sniffing. "It just saved time and b-b-bother, really."

The phone rang. Ernest picked it up. "Yes, Mr. Van Linschooten," he said crisply. "I'll be down without fail, first thing in the morning, to taste the Dimbula. Right you are. See you at the hong." He hung up.

"Is *she* going to let you go?" Miss Levesque sneered.

Ernest looked at Nadia. "She is going to let me do whatever I want to do, aren't you, pigeon?"

"With precision," Nadia agreed, smiling up at him.

"You'll do whatever *she* wants you to do," Mrs. Greenhut commented cynically.

"Whatever *he* is wanting to do," Nadia murmured, gazing adoringly at him, "is what *I* am wanting him to do."

THE shrill sound of a whistle screamed through the apartment. "The annunciation of the bubbly boil!" Nadia cried, hurtling toward the kitchenette. "I will concoct the tea."

"No," Ernest said firmly. "Let them make their own tea. I have quite a decent little Terai they may

use," he said graciously. "It's not the best, but they won't know any better."

"Tea!" said Miss Levesque. "I want coffee!"

"Not in *my* apartment," Ernest told her, quietly but firmly. "From now on no one is going to be permitted to so much as pass the door who has even a trace of mocha on his or her breath."

Nadia looked at him and again he felt like a tea leaf—uncurling sensually as the steaming water permeated his receptive tissues. But the sensation was pleasurable, not agonizing at all. He didn't even care if the water in his kitchenette had boiled without anyone's having put the kettle on the stove. A little witchcraft might come in very handy in coping with domestic routine.

"You and I, Nadia," he said, "will go down to your apartment

and you will show me how you make tea on your samovar."

"She not only makes him do what she wants," Mrs. Greenhut said, with grudging admiration, "but she makes him *think* it's what he wants. Let's face it—we're licked, Desi."

"Maybe," Miss Levesque said wistfully, "since she's taking Ernest away from us, the least she can do is teach us some of her modern methods. What with us being neighbors and all."

Nadia turned to look back over her shoulder. "In truth, ladies," she said, "I would be willing to teaching you my methodology. If only," she added pensively, "I myself can resolving just how it was I am doing it."

Evelyn E. Smith

WATCH YOUR STEP!

If you've read Voltaire's romances, you remember that one of his heroes was caught between two fanatical factions—one claiming that worshippers should enter the temple on the right foot, the other arguing that it should be the left. Voltaire's hero avoided alienating either by jumping into the temple on both feet!

The matter of which foot to use and who puts first foot into a house has long been a mystical problem. It becomes especially acute on New Year's morning; if a woman or a fair-haired man enters a home after the clock has struck midnight, bad luck is sure to follow.

One way out of the difficulty is for the "first-footer" to bring a shovelful of coal to keep the home fires burning. In Scotland, he brought a bottle of Scotch.

Certain villages hire certified lucky persons to be first-keepers on special occasions. Applying? Bring affidavits!

Yours FOR THE ASKING

By WINSTON MARKS

Illustrated by KOSSIN

*One picture may be worth ten
thousand words . . . but there's
one word that's worth a billion!*

IT was the first morning out of Los Angeles on the Magic-Couch Streamliner and Elliott Briston, New York advertising executive, had remained in his berth of his private bedroom to sleep off his hangover.

He responded, finally, to the second call for lunch and gingerly

trod the length of three writhing pullmans to seek black coffee. The diner was full and the steward had him by one plump arm, guiding him to a table with two male occupants, before he discovered this unhappy fact.

Sinking down heavily, he glanced out the window at the yellow-

hot Arizona desert and, in spite of the airconditioning, wiped perspiration from his brow. He penciled, "Coffee!!!" on the pink order-check and waved it imperiously until a waiter took it from him.

Then he groaned. Not for any particular reason. He groaned merely at the cheerless prospect of the trip before him, at the sun-soaked landscape that hurt his eyes, at the mild headache that throbbed in his balding skull. He could be home by now. But the thought of all that vibration, of the terrifying altitude, caused him to groan again. No airplane for Briston!

THE newspapers across from him dropped, and his two dinner companions were revealed. The one closest to the window sat tall in his chair. His face was narrow, but it veed out to a half-acre of forehead above two black eyes set far apart. The straight line of his long nose swept up to a pair of cocked eyebrows.

The short man—or boy—vaguely resembled Mickey Rooney. Both were outlandishly dressed in richly dark capes, buckles, sparkling buttons and ballooning, uncreased sleeves. Briston groaned a third time. Lord Almighty, *characters!* What he could very nicely do without just then was a pair of characters!

"Friend," said the taller man gently, "are you in distress?"

Briston mumbled rudely, "Go back to Hollywood and leave me alone. Gotta hangover."

The regal head with the long, Shakespearean haircut turned to his companion. "Hangover? What would that be, Puck?"

"A mortal infliction from over-indulgence, Your Grace. As they say in these parts, he was deep in his cups last night."

Whereas the tall man affected a distinct British accent, the one called Puck had the slightest trace of Scotch burr.

"Nothing mortal about it," Briston said peevishly. "I'll recover. Just give me time—and a little peace, if you don't mind!" He seized the glass of icewater before him and with it sought vainly to ease his parched throat.

As the ice clicked against his dentures, the tall man said, "Let no man, mortal or nay, suffer at my table. Drink deeply, friend!"

Briston was in the very act when the dark man spoke thusly and twiddled his fingers at the glass. The cold liquid suddenly fizzed in his throat like a tasteless seltzer mixture. He gulped, swallowed, coughed, belched into his napkin and stared wide-eyed at the chief character. His headache was gone. So were the quiver in his stomach and the dryness in his throat.

At this juncture, the waiter brought food for the strangers and coffee for Briston. The executive sniffed hungrily. "I think I'll have ham and eggs, after all," he said.

"Sorry, suh, breakfast is off the menu. Some nice cutlets?"

"Oh, very well." It was a rare concession for Elliott Briston to consume anything but ham and eggs for his first meal of the day, but he was feeling remarkably fit—and hungry.

When the waiter was gone, he demanded not unpleasantly, "What did you toss into my water, mister? You a doctor or something?"

The man shook his head slightly. "Oberon is my name. Just a fellow traveler who dislikes suffering at his board. This is Puck. From Scotland, you know."

"I guessed as much. And you're British, of course. Enjoying your visit over here?"

"Immensely, eh, Puck? And to top it off, we discover that the rumors which drew us to America to be wholly quite false."

"Rumors?"

"Aye. Distressing ones. You see, my business is, ah—"

He was interrupted by the arrival of Briston's cutlets. The speed with which they were served, plus a dried up look that liberal lashings of stale butter sauce failed to hide, raised suspicion that they were already long since cooked—were probably, even,

someone else's cutlets long since turned back or misordered. Briston wrinkled his nose at them and was on the point of calling the waiter, when Oberon twiddled his fingertips again.

BEFORE his eyes, Briston's sorry cutlets transformed themselves into a platter of sizzling ham and golden-yoked eggs, cooked precisely as he liked them.

"As I was saying, my business is magic. And the rumor was abroad that America was abounding with whole organizations devoted to the application of the principles of magic." He sipped the last of his soup. "Since I hold the patents and all rights to franchise, this was disquieting news, as you can well understand."

Briston *didn't* understand. He wasn't yet reconciled to the ham-and-egg switch. His usually shrewd mind floundered for an explanation. An illusion? The man was babbling about magic.

He sliced the ham. There was no mistaking the tender, delicately flavored meat. It was ham. And the eggs were eggs.

"Just a moment," a bewildered Briston objected. "What goes?"

"Oh! You prefer the cutlets? My apologies."

The fingers twitched and the cutlets were back, a single wedge missing from the one on the left of the platter. Likewise, the flavor

in Briston's mouth at once altered to conform with the evidence of his eyes. He was now chewing a sad cutlet.

"As it turned out," Oberon continued, brushing back a purple velvet cuff and cutting his own meat, "the rumor was based on the silly propensity you Americans have for propagating and believing falsehoods."

The words distracted Briston's attention from the luncheon legerdemain. He was a good Rotarian and belonged to the Chamber of Commerce. The blanket accusation that all Americans were liars and suckers snapped up his head.

"Say that again?" he challenged.

"Your—how do they call it, Puck?"

"Advertising."

"Oh, yes. Your advertising, in periodicals and newspapers, has discovered the term, if not the function of, *magic*—and the word is being thoroughly abused."

"In what sense?"

"In the exact sense. Puck and I have traveled your country over, seeking to verify the claims made for the hundreds of items bearing the word 'magic' in their names or descriptions. We've examined 'magic' perfumes, coal-stokers, zipper-fasteners, cosmetics, toys, can-openers, automobile transmissions, deodorants, writing pens, laundry-soaps, food-seasonings, ladies' breast-supports — yea, even

breast-fortifiers—what else, Puck?"

"Shampoos, fishing reels, rubber girdles, adding machines, hand tools, bathing suits—"

"Ah, that white bathing suit!" Oberon exclaimed. "Gave me quite a start. This girl fell into the swimming pool, and the suit practically vanished, as advertised. Just one more example of technical ingenuity, however. No magic about it, really."

BRISTON'S eyes narrowed with curiosity. "Just what are you two promoting, anyhow?"

"Promoting?"

"Advertising," Puck translated for Oberon.

"We are advertising nothing. Ours was a punitive mission. Genuine magic franchises are no longer granted to mortals, who have long since demonstrated their inability to cope with magic. Had we found any cases of real infringement, we were prepared to nullify the spells and punish the boot-limiters."

"Bootleggers," Puck corrected.

Oberon nodded his thanks. "But it wasn't necessary. All the claims are false, and punishing liars is the office of Beelzebub and his crew, not of mine."

"*Mister* Oberon," Briston said coldly, "it so happens that I am president of a major advertising agency, and I fail to find your insinuations even mildly amusing.



Coming from a foreigner, as a matter of fact—”

Oberon's eyes arched with surprise. “You mean, you share the responsibility for this farcical advertising device?”

The man's effrontery stopped Briston cold. In the pause, Oberon shot a question. “Then, perhaps, you can tell me how in the name of Sherwood you retain public confidence in your products when, month after month, you deliberately mislead people?”

“This,” roared Elliott Briston, “has gone far enough! I don't care if you're direct from the Court of St. James. No one can impugn the integrity of the American advertising industry to my face!”

Wherewith, he slammed a fat hand on the table, struck the far edge of his platter inadvertently and catapulted the cutlets, complete with butter sauce, onto Puck's chest.

Briston clapped down a five-dollar bill and stalked out of the diner.

IN the first vestibule, he felt his hangover return and, by the time he reached his compartment, the half-consumed meal in his stomach was rebelling.

He turned the knob and stepped into his bedroom. Puck stood grinning at him mischievously, leaning against the closet. “What

kept you, mon?” he smirked.

Even in his bewilderment and physical misery, Briston noted that the butter sauce had scored a satisfying hit. The greasy stuff was generously smeared down the green cape and crimson jerkin.

“You didn't pass me! How did you—?”

“It's magic, doc,” Puck replied, his Scotch burr falling strangely upon the Bugs Bunny familiarity. “Now, I'll tell you what I'm going to do. Sit down there, and I'll give you a demonstration.”

Briston sank to his unmade berth, while his visitor fumbled in his cape. He held up a glass jar from whose label he read, “The Handi-Pak Magic Cleaner. Especially for travelers. Removes spots in a jiffy.”

“So what?”

“Recognize the product, doc?”

Briston did. His company handled the advertising account.

“Now, I just wipe off the excess gravy,” which he did with a Pullman towel, “and smear on a scooch of this ‘Magic Cleaner,’ rub in as the directions direct—and presto! Wha' happens?”

The executive squirmed. The demonstration was not impressive. The gravy splotch was slightly less noticeable, but only because it was now spread over a much larger area.

“Now, were I a gullible mortal,” Puck chirruped in his highly

pitched, raspy voice, "I should be minus a change of clothing, would I not? The only spots this worthless concoction might conceal are the blots on the consciences of its manufacturer and—" he stared insolently at Briston—"the advertising agency which undertakes to besmirch the good name of magic by so outrageously misapplying it."

Briston flushed. "Nothing short of a dry-cleaning could be expected to clean up a mess like that," he defended. "It's not meant for such — such conspicuous stains, you know."

"I find no reservations or qualifications to that effect on the label," said Puck. He screwed the lid on the jar and tossed it to Briston. "Now behold the workings of *real magic!*"

He passed both hands before him and chanted, "O, mighty Oberon, transfer this wicked stain to its rightful owner, to demonstrate the meaning of magic to this unworthy creature. Let justice be done, o, mighty Oberon, King of all the Faeries."

THE words rang meaninglessly on Briston's ears, for his eyes commanded the attention of his confused brain. The great gravy stain removed itself from Puck's robes and slowly floated across the compartment, to plaster its reverse image against the front of

Briston's light, Palm Beach linen jacket.

"Now will you admit that you have grossly misused the term, 'magic' in your deceiving advertising?" Puck demanded.

"I'll admit nothing, a billion times *no!*" Briston roared at his tormentor. His stomach roiled with anger and undigested cutlets.

"Still not convinced, eh?" Puck mused. "You will regret your pig-headedness, mortal. A billion times, you deny the truth, do you? Very well, then a billion times you must call to me before I shall respond to lift the spell which I cast herewith—

Suffer hence the toils of
magic,
Continental and pelagic.
Suffer trials both gay and
tragic,
Learn the meaning of *true*
magic!"

"Why, you fugitive from an Elk's smoker, gettahelloutta my bedroom before I call the conductor!" Briston yelled.

"My name is Puck. Remember that name, sirrah, for until you have uttered it one billion times, it will be you who is the fugitive —from the manifestations of honest, ordinary, everyday magic."

"Now, get this," Briston raged. "I've got connections in the entertainment business, from Broadway to Hollywood. If you bother me again, I'll get you blacklisted in

every booking office from Maine to—”

He was talking to himself. For a moment, he thought he saw Puck's impish grin hanging in the air by itself like that of the Cheshire Cat, but it proved to be only a wave in the grain of the fine wood paneling.

Briston pressed hot palms to his throbbing temples. “Oh, brother!” he muttered. “No more champagne binges for me! That glass of ice-water! I'm lit up like a color TV show all over again.”

A discreet knock on his door raised his head. “What is it?”

“Porter, suh. Can I come in?”
“Sure, I guess so.”

The door opened. “Steward told me ‘bout your accident in the diner, suh. Got some spot-remover heah. Isn't much good, but it might help out.”

Briston stared down at a small bucket labeled, Handi-Pak Magic Cleaner. It was the large, economy size. Before the executive could object, the porter had pried off the lid.

“That stuff's no good—”

While the porter was looking for a place to set the lid, a snaky streamer of the white cream swirled itself to Briston's suit-front, vibrated joyously for some two seconds and darted into the can.

“Now, where at's this here stain, suh?”

Briston looked down his front.

His Palm Beach was immaculate!

Well, of course. That other—it had all been a dream.

“Your steward is mistaken, porter. It was the man across from me at the table who had the accident.”

The porter shook his head. “You the gentleman left the five dollars for lunch?” he insisted.

“Never mind, I tell you. No stains on me.”

The porter left, disgruntled. Briston swallowed two sleeping pills, peeled off his jacket and threw himself on his berth. He'd better sleep this off completely before he got into trouble, he decided.

HE awoke at three A. M., cold sober, hungry and bored. Even aboard the luxurious Magic-Coach Streamliner, dining and club car employees had to sleep sometime. No food until morning. He undressed, washed his face, got into his robe and tried to read. The hunger pangs recurred sharply, distracting his concentration. He could take more sleeping pills, but too many of the damned things left him fuzzy and nauseated.

Finally, he grabbed his fat bill-fold and moved for the door. For a price, he should be able to arouse someone who could fix him a chicken sandwich or something. Even if he failed, the walk up to diner was something to do.

He pulled the door open and staggered back.

Bright lights glared at him. A blare of sound slapped his unprepared eardrums — music from a fifteen-piece dance-band, gay voices, shuffling feet of dancers, rattling dishes—the smell of mouth-watering food.

He hugged the door jamb and peeked out again. Under his feet, the faint clickety-click, clickety-click of the wheels still rapped rhythmically and the swaying motion told him that he was still en route to New York. But his eyes blinked at an utterly incredible sight.

It was a great ballroom, at least 30 yards square. Under a crystal chandelier lay a sumptuous smorgasbord, around which feasting couples in evening clothes clustered, stuffing themselves with smoked turkey, cheeses, fish, ham and dozens of unidentifiable delicacies. Others were dancing, tossing confetti and streamers about, bibbing champagne and generally comporting themselves in a traditional New Year's Eve manner.

On the fourteenth of July!

The conductor, gray hair neatly combed down his neck under his black, boxy cap, whirled by with a sequin-gowned, platinum blonde. He caught Briston's eye. "Everything all right, Mr. Briston?"

"What in the world is going on?"

"Won't you join us, Mr. Briston?" the blonde cajoled as the conductor glided with her close by. "You know, this is all in your honor."

"My honor?"

The conductor nodded agreement. "The Magic-Coach Streamliner is at your disposal, Mr. Briston. How about a snack? You *are* hungry, aren't you?"

The blonde dimpled at him, "And just a teeny bit bored?"

BRISTON fought to retain his senses. Everything stood out in bold, colorful relief. There was no dream sensation. The dancing couple each took an arm and tried to pull him out, and he felt the pressure of their fingers add to the kinesthetic reality of the absurd scene—the swaying train, the sparkling lights, the gay laughter, the taunting food-aroma . . .

Hunger and boredom were forgotten. Fervently, he wished he were back in the relative sanity of his office. He craved the security of his over-sized leather swivel-chair, his chrome-trimmed desk, from which he controlled the only slightly insane personnel of his advertising empire.

Swish!

He was sitting, no longer standing. And in his office! He gaped at the familiar surroundings.

Reality tottered dangerously for a moment, then the time-space gap

in his memory became uneasily bridged with synthetically rationalized, vaguely conceived details of completing the trip, the assorted trivia of eating, sleeping, changing trains at Chicago, arriving at Grand Central, taxiing to his club, turning his luggage over to his valet, sleeping, arising and coming to work.

But, deep in his mind, he knew it wasn't so. Down in his mental trash-bin, were troublesome impressions of a man named Oberon and a lad called Puck.

He rocked forward and looked over the neat pile of reports on his vast, uncluttered desk-top.

Normality!

He sighed and began reading the top report. It was an accounting report on the weekly business summaries during his five-week absence on the west coast.

He frowned. They had forgotten to run off a month's sub-total. Briston pulled a small lever at his elbow, and his personal computing machine slid out of its hiding place in the desk. He ran his eyes over the footings and touched the keyboard. Instantly, the little machine clacked, ka-chunked and spat out an answer on its inch of white paper tape.

Briston swore. He'd forgotten to clear the machine the last time he used it. He struck the clear button twice and began again. Once more, the calculator spat out

the little tape at the first touch of his fingers.

Same answer.

STARTLED, Briston carefully scanned the four 5-digit figures he was trying to add. Mentally he took a rough total. It checked with the two tape answers.

Then his eyes dropped to the tiny, gilt label on the machine. It read, *Munrowe Executive Model*, and, below this, with *Magic Touch*.

He jabbed an intercom button. "Miss Hodiak, would you please run these figures off on your—"

His well-oiled swivel-chair creaked as he violently flung himself back from the intercom. The trim, auburn-topped head of his secretary protruded from the tiny speaker of the intercom. Her eyes were half closed as though she were listening.

"Never mind!" he gasped.

The head withdrew and Briston stared at the squawk-box. The label read, *Tela-Talk-Rite*.

A quick run down his client list proved that his firm handled the Tela-Talk-Rite Intercom account. He rifled a stack of literature, found the circular he wanted and studied the ad copy.

Sure enough! *Tela-Talk-Rite features the Magic-Master Control that summons your party with the speed of light.*

Briston found himself criticiz-

ing the ad copy from a rather objective point of view. The squawk-box didn't summon people at all. It was supposed only to put them in touch with one another — orally, not bodily. Not even visually! Then, why in hell this ridiculous 3-D projection of Miss Hodiak's head when he called her?

Oberon. Puck!

The memory of the spell came back with appalling clarity and, with it, the mind-staggering implication, the not-so-subtle warning that his troubles were only beginning.

"Junior!" he barked into the intercom.

P. WELLINGTON HARRIS, Jr., first vice-president, thrust his sallow, middle-aged countenance through the speaker and blinked unseeingly. "Yes, E. J.?"

"I want a survey, right now. I want the name of every product we handle that has the word *magic*, either in its name or in any ad copy we've printed about it."

Harris clouded up. "Lord, chief, that's a job. 'Magic' is like 'new'. You know your own directive on that word."

"You mean, it's at the top of the buyer-response list?"

"Sure. It's loaded. We work it in every way we can."

"Thanks, never mind then."

"Anything else, chief?"

Experimentally, Briston stretched out a finger and ran it through his assistant's carefully combed salt-and-pepper hair. He fully expected his finger to encounter nothing, but he snatched back his hand. His finger was vaseline-smeared, and a silly cowlick stood up on Harris' head until a hand materialized from the speaker and slapped it down. Harris' eyes wandered around as if he were searching for a fly.

"No, that's all." The head disappeared, and Briston fumbled a *Brent* cigarette to his lips. After three tries he got it lit. He sucked hard and inhaled deeply.

A wisp of smoke curled from the glowing tip, but no vapor entered his mouth. Nor was there heat, flavor or satisfaction in his throat and lungs.

Of course not. *Brent* featured the *Magic Filter—removes all harsh irritants*. That, naturally, included all the smoke.

Briston wanted a smoke. He *needed* a smoke. He broke off the filter, took two furtive drags, spat out shredded tobacco and crushed the butt in his ashtray.

He stood up and began to cross the expensive, thick-pile carpet—it was Dunlevy's Domestic Persian, with *Magic Weave*.

The carpet rolled gently under his feet, picking him up and launching him on the crest of its wave like a surfboard rider. It

deposited him, pale and agitated, at the door.

HE hauled the panel open. "Miss Hodiak, would you please come in here? No, wait!" He reconsidered. "I'll come out there." He moved onto the fancy tile floor, totally forgetting that it was dressed with Honson's Magic Floor Wax. Somehow he retained his balance as he slid in a great circle route around Miss Hodiak's desk.

His secretary's sharp features stiffened in amazement. "Do that again," she challenged.

Instead, Briston rested a trembling hand on her slender shoulder for support.

This was an unthinkable gesture for a man of Briston's scrupulous caution. For 52 years, he had cherished his bachelorhood and chosen most carefully the time and place to lay his hand on female flesh.

All women, to Briston, were predatory, but some were in more dangerously potent positions than others. Employees, for instance. And Gladys Hodiak was in a super-taboo class of her own. Briston was well aware of the large breasts, narrow hips and long, slim legs that languished in maidenhood. Also, he knew that, for the seven years of her employment in her present capacity, her designs upon him had intensified with each new wrinkle around her eyes.

This was all very well, as it worked out. Her jealous possessiveness made her the perfect chaperone, protecting him most effectively against the parade of other females who had occasion to enter his office. This left only Miss Hodiak to cope with and, until this moment, Briston had managed beautifully.

But now she recovered quickly from the shock of Briston's first bodily touch in seven long years, expectant years. She stood up quickly, as if to steady him, and just happened to lean too close.

"Why, Mr. Briston, you're pale!" she exclaimed with just the right mixture of concern and sultry warmth in her voice.

He weaved slightly, and she moved with him in an exaggerated motion that multiplied their points of contact alarmingly.

"Dammit, Miss Hodiak, will you stand still? I'll be all right. Just slipped on that slick floor. All I want is . . ."

What did he want?

HIS mind was growing confused again. The miasma of Miss Hodiak's expensive scent enveloped him. She made no attempt to move away, and her body warmth struck through his clothing like a blow-torch.

"That perfume!" Briston gasped. "What the devil is it—pure musk?"

"Magic Morning," she replied, pleased at this first reference to her person in the same seven years. "You know the brand. The report is on your desk right now. We're handling it for—"

"Good Lord, girl, that stuff doesn't *need* advertising!" Gooseflesh rippled along his spine, and his knees felt like frictionless, two-way hinges. He found himself gripping her by the waist for support.

"Help me to a chair!" he demanded.

Miss Hodiak was no fool. "Better stand still a moment until you catch your balance," she said.

Now every muscle in his body seemed to dissolve in liquid fire, all but his hands, and they took on a volition of their own.

"Why, Mr. Briston!"

He cursed his hands. It was the spell, that's what it was. It was that damned Puck! He said the name aloud.

Always quick on abbreviations, this time Miss Hodiak misunderstood. Instantly she puckered her lips and elevated her face to an optimum angle.

"Puck!" Briston repeated in helpless anguish. "*Puck! Puck!*"

Miss Hodiak opened her eyes. "I am *pucking*, darling. What are you waiting for?" she whispered in a husky voice.

Her hand reached up, stroked the back of his neck and provided the little pressure necessary to

overcome his shattered self-resistance.

He was lost, sealed, signed and delivered.

Despite the magic floor wax and the magic carpet, he managed to move himself into the privacy of his office, but Gladys stuck like the curse of the spell itself. It was there in the great leather chair, that P. Wellington Harris, Jr., found them, minutes later.

"Don't look so startled, Junior," Miss Hodiak said gayly. "You guessed we'd be engaged sooner or later, didn't you?"

"What the devil, E. J.?" Obviously he hadn't guessed it, but a smirk began to spread over his crafty face.

"*Puck! Puck, Puck!*" Briston enunciated glassily.

His newly acquired betrothed peeled herself from his lap and exited in shameless triumph. After an embarrassed but interested sidelong glance at his superior, Harris followed her.

THE spell of Magic Morning faded away, leaving Briston rumpled and weak. He stared at the pile of reports, trying to focus his spinning brain on something.

Sign the reports.

He fumbled the fountain pen from his pocket, but it escaped his fingers like a bird. It uncapped itself, hovered over the pile, signed the top report, nudged it aside

and began working its way busily through the whole stack.

It was a Barker "61" with Magic Flow.

Robbed even of this simple chore, Briston's mind returned to the plaguing worry of Miss Hodiak and his indiscretion. How could he ever escape her and that dratted perfume?

His darting fountain pen bared a new report for signature, and his eye was caught by a line of typing. It was the report on the Magic Morning Perfume. The campaign, it seemed, had gone over extremely well. In the words of Wellington Harris, *Two million bottles sold already. Within a few months, every other woman in the country will be wearing Magic Morning.*

A terrible thought flashed into Briston's mind. He was stuck with Miss Hodiak—that he knew. Harris wanted his job and, if Briston failed to go through with the marriage, this was just the bit of juicy scandal that Harris would gleefully bring to the attention of the board of directors.

But, if he did marry this jealous, over-possessive Hodiak woman, what would happen the first time he flubbed his dub over some other female wearing Magic Morning Perfume?

His mind froze. "Puck!" he said. "Puck-Puck-Puck-Puck!"

He timed himself with the sweep second-hand of his watch. Five

times a second was as fast as he could utter it.

Three thousand six hundred seconds to the hour. Times five Pucks per second, this meant 18,000 utterances per hour. Divide one billion by 18,000 to get the number of hours. Divide that by 24 to get the number of days. Divide that by 365 to get the number of—good Lord—years!

How long before Puck would return to answer his billionth call?

The little calculator at his elbow ka-chunked obligingly and coughed out the answer. "Six years, plus 102 days."

EVEN in deepest panic, Briston's shrewd mind functioned. His eyes alighted on the squawk-box. He jabbed at the end button, the one that was left over with no connections at the other end. He called, "Oberon, Oberon, come here!"

The speaker crackled with profane static and belched forth a black balloon that resolved itself into Oberon's handsome dark head. This time there was nothing vacant about the eyes. He said, "What in . . . ? Oh, it's you!"

"Yeah, it's me. Mister Oberon, are you aware of the curse your devilish little Puck threw at me?"

"Curse?" questioned Oberon. "He said it was just a spell."

Briston choked out the details and related his mishaps to date.

He finished, "I tell you, it's impossible! I'll be an old man before I finish. I'll die of throat cancer. They'll put me away for being a maniac!"

"How's that? I didn't quite catch that last," Oberon frowned. "The maniac part, I mean."

Briston pleaded, "I can't go around sliding on carpets, using pens that write by themselves and reacting to every female who wears a perfume with 'magic' in its description. They'll lock me up. Already I've got myself engaged—"

"Just a moment. As I understand it, Puck cast his spell only upon you?"

"That's right. Everywhere I turn, I run into it. I can't help reacting."

"It scarcely seems just," Oberon mused aloud. "Enough to make anyone feel conspicuous. I agree with you that Puck is an incomparable scamp." His eyes became dreamy. "I remember a night one midsummer . . ."

"I need relief, not reminiscence," Briston moaned. "Can't you lift the spell?"

"Twould scarcely be nice. Puck's a likely sprite. Twould crush him were I to rescind a simple little prank-spell like this. You have one favor, however. There's small reason why you should bear all the onus for the prevaricating sins of your whole profession."

He thrust a long, velvet-clad arm out of the intercom and blew a shuddering blast on a curled ram's horn. The note swelled upward and held until Briston's ear-drums vibrated in painful resonance.

A deep hush settled upon them as if the whole world were pausing to listen.

Oberon spoke softly.

"Advertising mortals all,
What's named as magic, *is*,
per se!

Reflect until your billionth
call

To Puck, 'What Fools Ye
Mortals Be!'"

Briston staggered to his feet. "No, no! What are you doing?"

It was too late. Oberon's sleek head had disappeared, and no amount of screaming and banging on the intercom would induce him to reappear.

SECONDS later, the office door opened before an exploding Gladys Hodiak and a distraught P. Wellington Harris, Jr. Both skidded onto the carpet, slid over to the desk and stared down at Elliott J. Briston in wild-eyed panic.

He sat there, head sunken between his shoulders, muttering "Puck-Puck-Puck-Puck . . ."

Miss Hodiak was trying to peel Harris' fingers from her narrow waist. "Mr. Briston, what's hap-

pened? The Magic Margin on my typewriter keeps—Elliott, darling, you aren't listening! Good heavens, Mr. Harris, will you keep your hands off me?"

Harris was mortified. "Chief, chief! Sorry, Miss Hodiak, I can't help it—chief, wake up! The world's gone mad!"

"Puck-Puck-Puck-Puck . . ."

Miss Hodiak managed to slip from Harris' unwilling embrace and rippled around the desk to Briston's side. She shook his shoul-

ders. "Darling—Elliott, do something. Don't you hear me? Like Junior said, the world is going crazy. What should we do?"

"Puck-Puck-Puck-Puck — I'm doing it — Puck-Puck . . ."

"Yes, but—"

"I've only got 999,999,862 Pucks to go. Puck-Puck-Puck—you two had better get started."

Winston K. Marks

NUMBERS GAME

Ask people to pick a number from 1 to 10 and the odds are that most will choose 3 and almost all the rest will take 7. Why? All through history, odd numbers have been felt to have great magical qualities.

In court, the clerk calls, "Hear ye, hear ye, hear ye!" Three dunning letters are traditionally sent to debtors before legal action is taken. How many cheers for good old Whozis? Three, of course.

There were 7 days in Creation and that number occurs all through the Old Testament. The Romans made it the "natural" in dice. Nor is it accidental that it's the 7th son of a 7th son who has mystical powers, or that 7 years of bad luck supposedly follow the breaking of a mirror.

The number 13 is so universally feared that its assumed origin, the fact that there were 13 guests at the Last Supper, is not very satisfactory . . . long before Christ, it was considered evil. When the 13th comes out on a Friday, the day is considered doubly dangerous. Yet statistics indicate that there are fewer accidents and crimes on any Friday the 13th than other days, no doubt because people get more careful, even to the point of staying in bed all day!

As a rule, 7 times 7 is the height of good luck . . . yet the number 49 is "The Nameless Number" to the Japanese, who consider it so dire that they won't even say its true name!

It's a Gift

*A spectacular gift and it
was all Ben's! Or was
it the other way around?*

By GEORGE HAYMAN

BEN FINLAY was no scientist and well he knew it. But he was a first-rate mechanic — one of the best aircraft assemblers in the big Santa Monica plant. He could figure out anything mechanical. But the Power wasn't mechanical. It just seemed to happen — as if some unseen entity turned it on, like a water faucet.

For three days now, he'd experimented secretly with the mysterious Power. Where it came from, he had no idea. Nor did he know why it had come to reside in his head. One thing was certain—the Power was not complete.

"Somehow, it should work the other way," he mumbled. He worked alone at the bench in his garage. He kept telling himself, "There ought to be another way, just as easy, to unweld them." In his hands, he held two nails, their heads stuck together. He studied them intently.

So far, he'd arrived at two facts. First, he had to be angry about something or at someone before the Power began to operate. And secondly, his eyes had to be pointing in the direction of the metals in order to fuse them together.

As he studied his last experi-

ment, he noticed the battered alarm clock on the bench. It was after three in the afternoon. Ben worked the night shift, 4:00 to 12:30. Alza, his wife, would have a light snack ready for him any minute now. Then he'd have to be traveling.

SURE enough, he heard the kitchen door slam and the cocker puppy yapping. Alza was on her way to the garage. Usually, she just called good and loud.

He tried to brush the nails and junk he'd been experimenting with under a box, but without success. As Alza entered, she shooed the cocker away from the hem of her housedress. Ben was healthy and of fairly good size but, compared to his buxom spouse, he appeared shriveled and poorly.

"What's going on out here?" she demanded. "What's all this stuff stuck together?" Then she snorted. "Ben Finlay! Spending money on junk again, thinkin' to make a fortune. Won't you ever get any sense into that head of yours?"

"I haven't spent a dime," he said defensively. He decided he'd better tell her something about the Power, although he knew she'd never understand.

"I've made a great discovery," he said. "We're going to be millionaires."

"You don't say!" Alza frowned. "Well, we can use ten dollars

of that million right now. The collector was here about the television set. I had to give him ten dollars out of the furniture payment."

"Good Lord!" moaned Ben. "When I make that up on payday, there won't be enough left for groceries. At least, not after paying the light bill, and the five dollars for the milk." It always seemed the same. Scheming and scraping — a payment here and a payment there, every payday. "But it won't be long," he said, trying to reassure himself as well. "There's a few details to work out before we can put my idea to work. Then we're in the big money."

"That's usually the way with your inventions," she said. "What's this one? You gotta show me you're not spending any money."

So he told her, in general, how the Power worked, describing many different airplane parts he'd repaired on the job. "I haven't told anyone but you. But the inspectors at the plant are getting a little snoopy. We haven't reported any misdrilled holes the last few days, or any cracked material, or any parts cut too short. I've been fixing them when no one was looking."

HE picked up two nails from the pile on the bench and held their heads together. "Here, I'll

show you," he said. Then he concentrated on the lawnmower that wasn't in the garage. "That cheap chiseler next door!" he told himself vehemently. "When is he going to return my lawnmower? Another few weeks, and he'll swear it belongs to him!" His head buzzed ever so slightly. That was enough for just two little nails. The heads were welded together.

"You see, Alza. They're welded — not just around the edge, but all the way through!"

"Don't kid me," she laughed hollowly. "There's something sticky on them. What is the stuff and how much does it cost?"

"I tell you, Alza, it just happens for practically no reason at all. It's a gift that's gonna make us rich."

"You're not very funny. Come on in the house and eat your lunch. It's time to start for work."

Ben let her go without trying to explain further. He shouldn't have tried in the first place. Alza was a good mother to the four children — two boys and two girls — and a truly wonderful cook. But her mind utterly lacked ability to grasp non-material matters.

Perhaps, if he'd started from the beginning, she might have understood a little better. If he'd started with Monday, for instance, when the Power first came over him at work . . .

He remembered it vividly. He'd

been drilling in his usual position on the main spar of the outerwing. The outerwing of the giant passenger plane is an integral fuel tank. They need the extra gasoline to fly the Atlantic and Pacific. As Ben well knew, every rivet and bolt hole in an integral fuel tank must be able to hold gasoline when the wind is screaming by at 400 miles an hour. The holes must be 100 per cent perfect.

That Monday, however, his thoughts dwelt overmuch on the light bill, the gas bill, on the month's payments in general. When the hole he was drilling began to break through the inch-thick dural of the main spar, it dawned on him that he was drilling with a quarter-inch drill. The hole properly demanded an eighth-inch drill.

Quickly, he jerked backward on the drill motor. The drill snapped, frozen in the hole. By the time he'd dug it out, the hole was an awful mess. It was egg-shaped — scrambled-egg-shaped.

COLD sweat ran down Ben's spine. He could foresee what was coming. He knew all too well the chain of events that would follow this disaster.

He was honor bound to call the inspector, who would gloat over the damage as he wrote it up on the back pages of the inspection book. Then the assistant foreman



IT'S A GIFT

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would come to see it. He'd change color several times and indulge in a lot of cursing, before chasing off after the foreman.

The foreman would come and wring his hands and then summon the general-foreman. Soon, everyone that was anyone around the plant would be there — engineers and all. They'd mill around and bat the problem back and forth a few times, thoroughly enjoying the excuse to leave their offices. All this at the expense of Ben Finlay.

"The main spar will have to be replaced," Ben told himself. "And it's worth \$2,000, if it's worth a cent." He kept staring at the ragged hole, wishing there was some way to plug it up. Welding was out of the question. The CAA would never allow that, because the flux and acid required would eventually rot the dural.

He could probably find some way to hide it from the inspector. But Ben Finlay couldn't bring himself to do such a thing. To cover up a weakness in an airplane, especially in the wing, was the dirtiest trick an aircrafter could pull on the passengers who would fly the oceans in the craft. No, Ben couldn't do that.

If it hadn't been for the monthly payments, trying to buy an old house and feed a wife and four kids on his paycheck, it wouldn't have happened.

He got madder by the second.

"That slimy furniture dealer, that rotten gas company," he kept telling himself and cussing until his head started to buzz. He wished wistfully that, for once, getting angry would do some good. All the time he stared at the damaged hole. If only it wasn't there.

Some errant spirit must have heard his unuttered wish — and paused to grant it. His head buzzed louder and louder. Waves of emotion billowed through his frame. Even his vision was so affected that he couldn't see the damaged hole distinctly any more.

However, he could see clearly, as if it were a breakaway drawing, the surface of the spar where the hole had been. Everything else was in its place. He reached out and touched the spot. It was no longer there — or else Ben Finlay had gone completely out of his mind.

IT took him a few minutes to convince himself. The hole really had been there — and now it wasn't. Somehow, someway, the edges of the hole had run together and made a solid mass of metal again.

He removed the broken drill from his drill motor and replaced it with the one of the proper size. He drilled the hole in the same spot as before. It came out shining and perfect as it was supposed to be.

This phenomenon might have completely upset another person—but not Ben Finlay. He'd always had implicit faith that, some day, success would come his way—that his little place in the universal scheme of things would be revealed. It would merely be his duty at the time to make the most of the opportunity. This, he knew almost instantly, was it.

His thoughts reverted to the garage and the time of day, when he glanced at the old alarm clock on the bench. Alza was calling again. And this time she screamed.

He ate his afternoon snack, unmindful of Alza's continuous jabbering, which consisted mostly of comments about money they didn't have. At 3:45, he grabbed his lunch pail and jumped into his '39 Packard 4-door.

Driving into the aircraft plant parking lot, he had the usual trouble squeezing into a place among the day-shifters' cars. He had to keep thinking of something pleasant. Tuesday he'd gotten mad when he scraped a fender and welded himself to a '53 Buick. It was a lucky thing he'd paid up his five-and-ten insurance on the other guy. The fender of the Buick was rather sad looking after he got through chiseling free.

Ben clocked in, a few minutes before four. As usual, he headed for his position in the outerwing jigs. He wanted to check the kind

of mess in which the day shift would leave the job.

He hadn't gone far when his foreman stopped him. "They want me to bring you upstairs, Ben." The foreman eyed him with more interest than he had ever received before. Ben sensed trouble of some sort and suspected it had to do with the Power.

"Okay," said Ben, feeling a little frightened.

"Don't look so scared," beamed the foreman. "The plant manager wants to see you. And it's good news, boy." He grinned, knowingly. "You fooled us for a few days, but we're not blind, you know."

"You're *not*?" Ben asked vaguely. He tagged along after the foreman through the outerwing section, up a narrow flight of steps, into a private conference room. A dozen or more big wheels sat in one-armed chairs. Behind the desk lounged the biggest wheel of them all, Mr. Sheck, the plant manager.

THEY put Ben in a chair and stuck a cigar in his mouth. Mr. Sheck opened up with a hearty, "Well, Finlay, you can pretty well guess why we've asked you up here. We've learned a good bit about your new method of welding dural and aluminum. Now we're ready to talk business."

It took Ben long, fumbling seconds to find his tongue. He'd chew-

ed actively on the cigar and the tobacco juice made butterflies in his stomach.

"Didn't know anyone knew anything about it," he managed to say at last.

Sheck haw-hawed to his henchmen, who haw-hawed back in unison. "Finlay," he boomed, "we keep a sharp eye on everything that goes on around here. And we're always happy to find you men working on constructive ideas of your own. They pay off sometimes. This one of yours is the best I've ever run into. Welding without a trace — that's colossal, Finlay! And there's no foreign matter left on the material — no flux, no chemical. How in the world do you do it?"

"I intended to keep the whole thing to myself, until I had it all worked out," he said.

"You're a shrewd one," said Sheck. "But that frame-section you welded yesterday had already been tagged by inspection and photographed for the engineers."

"You don't say?" said Ben, feeling foolish.

"Oh, yes," said Sheck, triumphantly. "Of course, our process department is working on an analysis of your method. I expect a full report from them at any moment now. We feel we have the right to analyze your methods. And we're perfectly willing to pay you for your idea. You could save

us a lot of time and position yourself to command greater compensation for your welding methods, by disclosing the entire process now."

Ben let that sink in for a minute and took the cigar from his mouth. "I'd rather not disclose the method. I want more time to work it out completely."

Sheck lost his friendly smile. "Now see here, Finlay. We have engineers, laboratories with thousands of dollars invested in equipment — they're all at your disposal. All we want is the rights to use your discovery to salvage damaged parts. Man, we can save millions of dollars a year!"

But Ben stood his ground. The Power was a gift to him. He wanted to work it out his own way. Besides and more to the point, these practical men wouldn't believe him if he told them the truth.

Two hours later, the conference recessed for coffee and doughnuts in the cafeteria. Then back again, but this time into a higher level conference room. Red leather chairs and paneled walls this time. They just weren't going to let him go without a deal.

BY nine that night, they had gotten around to issuing mild threats. "Legally, we have a right to your discovery and the equipment you use," said Sheck. "It's evident you did a great deal of

your development and testing in the plant and on company time. Probably you've used company equipment and materials."

"I don't believe I have," he answered. "And the salvages I've made were worth much more to the company than anything else I might have been doing."

"You're right, Finlay," said Sheck, who had shed his necktie. "Perhaps I'm just a bull in a china shop. I've used the wrong approach. Let's look at this thing from another point of view."

Then they began talking about Ben and his family. They listened to his troubles. About the bills, and how rough it was to get along on his pay.

"Tell you what we'll do as a compromise," said Sheck. "We'll give you \$500 for an option, say for a week, and \$500 every week thereafter until a contract is signed. You just sign an agreement to sell to us."

Ben agreed. He was glad to bring the conference to an end. They wanted a demonstration, but he refused. The coffee and doughnuts had straightened out his stomach. He was tired, but wanted to get to work just to be doing something.

Down in the shop, Ben felt that they were still plotting against him. "Just ease around," said the foreman. "Help me keep an eye on things."

No work — but there was method to their generosity. They hadn't given up hope of seeing a demonstration tonight.

Soon, Sheck came into the shop. "Now, Ben, we gotta get this plane fixed tonight. It's to be delivered tomorrow morning. The cowling of the right outboard engine has been put on and taken off so many times the scratches look like cobwebs. We haven't got time to fit another one, even if we had it assembled."

"Okay," said Ben. "I'm tired, but I'll do my best."

Out on the field, he stood under the floodlights at the tip of the right wing. He stared as steadily as he could at the curved surface of the cowling. He forced himself to think, "No money down, easy terms, immediate delivery, payday budget plan."

He guessed that did it. He could see the surface of the cowling grow shiny as the scratches smoothed out.

"Fine!" said Sheck. "Now you trot along home and get some rest."

As he turned to go into the hangar, Ben saw dozens of white collars who had assembled to watch him work. Ben hoped they remembered everything they saw, so that they now knew as much as he did about the Power. He made his way to the clock station, rang out and headed for home.

NEXT day, he flashed the check in front of Alza. "This is just the beginning," he said proudly. "We're in the money for good."

Alza was too stunned for comment. But even she had to admit that Ben had something this time. So she dressed the kids and ordered everyone into the '39 Packard. "We're going shopping," she announced.

Ben saw \$200 go like foam on flat beer, at Sears and J. C. Penny's. The back seat of the Packard was really loaded. The kids were screaming and stuffing popcorn into their faces.

"I got an idea," said Ben. "Let's pay off the furniture account at the finance company. Then, just in case something does happen to this deal, we'll have that one off our backs."

"Now you're talking," said Alza, who sweated blood, juggling the income to pay the finance company each month. "We ought to knock off a lot of interest, paying up in full."

"You said it," said Ben. And they were off up the street toward the finance office.

The man behind the grillwork was closing the door of the vault as Ben and his tribe came in. He latched the vault and walked over to Ben, smiling indulgently at the children sliding on the granite floor.

"I want to pay my account in

full," said Ben complacently.

"Very well, sir," the loan man said. "Your name?"

He brought out Ben's account and figured it up. He squinted at the total and said, "Three hundred and twenty-three dollars will pay it in full."

"Better tote that again," said Ben. "I figured it out a month ago. If I'd been able to pay in full then, it would have been less than \$300."

The man checked again. "Sorry, but \$323 is right. One per cent per month, for the time you've had the money."

"That's exactly the way I worked it," said Ben. He prided himself on his handling of figures. "One per cent per month, on the unpaid balance, brings it out to less than \$300."

The loan man smiled. "I see your error. It's one per cent per month on the *original* sales price, which was \$900."

"The original sales price!" Ben fairly shouted. Quickly, he made mental calculations. "You figured it on \$900. But I paid \$100 down. Are you sure the law allows you to charge that way?"

"That's the law," said the loan man disinterestedly.

Ben felt the newly familiar buzzing in his head. 'Did you get that, Alza? We're paying interest on our down payment,' he said angrily.

"Don't hit him, Ben. We can't

afford the expense," Alza warned him.

Ben beat the counter with his fists and told the loan man exactly what he thought of the money situation, here, there and everywhere. "I oughta get a lawyer and take this to court," he said. The afternoon sun glimmered on the bronze vault behind the loan man. The light hurt Ben's eyes as the buzzing grew stronger and stronger.

FINALLY, Ben slapped down enough money for one payment. "You can wait for the balance in regular payments, if and when we got it!" he stated. Then he and Alza gathered up the kids and stormed out, followed by the threats of the loan man to call a cop.

Outside, Ben was still so mad that he welded both doors on the right hand side of the old Packard. Before he went around to the other side, he leaned against the trunk of the car to calm down. They had to get home and he didn't want to climb in the windows, as the kids already were doing from the curb.

Ben was fairly well cooled down by the time the family arrived home. Then he saw the headlines in the afternoon paper—**MILLION DOLLAR DISCOVERY BY AIRCRAFTER.**

At first, Ben was furious. Then he guessed it hadn't been intentional on the part of the plant of-

ficials. He could tell this from the story beneath the headline. An enterprising reporter had put two and two together, after running down a few rumors.

But, with the story in the papers, Ben decided that the plant was no place for him tonight. He called them up, concluding with, "And tell Mr. Sheck I'm working on that deal here at home tonight."

After supper, he headed for the garage, but before he got out of the house, there came a banging on the front door.

"Cops are coming!" yelled the kids.

Sure enough. There were four cops in uniform along with the loan man from the finance company and several other official-looking individuals in plain clothes.

Ben let them into the front room. "Ben Finlay," said the officer whose badge shone like gold. "Seems like you did something to the vault in the finance office this afternoon. It's welded solid."

"We don't know how you did it," the loan man butted in, "but the insurance company says it'll cost \$5,000 to cut it open and \$20,000 to replace it. You'd better do something right now."

At this point, Ben thought a little misdirection of the truth would serve a good purpose. "I had nothing to do with your old money-trap. How could I?"

The loan man held up an after-

noon paper, shaking it in Ben's face. "What's this about a new method of welding you've discovered?"

BEN saw they had him, cold turkey. "Okay, fellows," he said, thinking fast. "I confess. I'll get my tools from the garage and be right with you."

The cops milled out the front door and to the side of the house. Ben went to the garage, but to the back instead of the front. He vaulted the fence into a neighbor's yard, crossed it and went out the gate into the alley. Soon he was three blocks away on the boulevard.

Micky's beer joint was on the corner. A few minutes later, Ben was blowing the suds off a second one.

Two distinguished-looking characters entered. Anyone could tell at a glance that they weren't here to drink beer. One looked perhaps a year or two short of a hundred and the other, middle-aged, wore a bow-tie. "We're looking for Gilmore Street," the young one told the bartender. They gave the street number, to be exact. It was Ben's.

He butted in. "And who would you want to see at that address?"

"A Mr. Ben Finlay," said the oldster.

"I am a Mr. Ben Finlay," he said, beginning to feel warm in-

side from the second beer.

"Really? Indeed! Well, as a matter of fact—that is . . . This is rather an informal place, Mr. Finlay, but we're from the University."

They finally spluttered out an introduction of themselves. Between the two of them, Ben gathered, they were scientists from UCLA and were deeply interested in psychic phenomena.

Ben took the gentlemen to a booth. He was in a mood to take the center of the stage, now that he was working on his third beer. The intelligent-looking characters drank buttermilk.

Ben came right out with it, making a clean breast of the whole business right then and there. If they had suspected, from details in the newspaper, that something phenomenal was taking place, Ben Finlay meant to inform them that they were right.

He'd expected their eyes to pop, that perhaps they'd call him a nut. In this, he was disappointed.

"Really not a rare case," said old bones. "We found a man once, who caused the ink to disappear from papers after they were signed. This, we finally discovered, came from his failure in business some years before, where he'd signed contracts that broke him."

"No kiddin'?" said Ben.

"And there was another chap who could cause the water to

separate from any material. We traced this to an experience of being lost in Death Valley for three days without water."

"Do you think all these things are alike?" asked Ben. "I mean, the same kinda Power?"

"We do," said the scientist. "It is parapsychologically implausible otherwise."

"Ah!" said Ben. "And have you ever found a way to reverse this Power?"

"No," said the other scientist, shaking his head sadly. "Not yet."

Ben's features drooped. "In that case, I'll take another beer."

THE scientists made a lot of notes and had Ben promise to visit the University one day next week for further study of his problem. They bought Ben his sixth beer, declining more buttermilk before taking their leave.

Ben drank a seventh and an eighth, while relating everything that had transpired to a group at the bar.

"But they can't help me a bit," said Ben, mournfully. "They've never heard of the Power being reversed, and these babies oughta know."

Sympathy grew for Ben around the bar stools. One fellow bought a round of liquor. Since it was already poured, Ben threw it down the hatch. By the time he remembered he was a beer drinker, he

was favoring one eye more than the other.

He decided to go home and settle with the cops and the loan man. If they were still there, someone was going to get walloped.

When he got off the bar stool, he could hardly have found the floor but for assistance from the phenomenon of gravity. He was making his way toward the door on his hands and knees when the cops entered.

Two of them got him to his feet. He swung one big haymaker at them all and passed out.

About nine the next morning, Ben groaned his way awake on a hard bunk in the city jail. As he tried to get up, he struck his head a resounding blow on the upper bunk. He was alone in the cell. The jailer, looking puzzled, was studying him through the bars.

As his mind cleared, his actions were anything but original. "You can't put me in here," he yelled, grasping the bars of the cell door. "Let me out, do you hear?" Behind the jailer were several other people, some in uniform, some in plain clothes.

"We've been trying all night to open this cell after you did something to it last night," said the jailer.

BEN inspected the cell door. It was as solid as the Rock of Gibraltar. "I must have been kinda

mad," he said, trying to remember what had happened.

"You were supposed to be in court this morning," said the jailer. "But, things being as they are, the court has come down here instead."

They had put a table and some chairs outside the cell. The judge hit the table with a mallet. He charged Ben with being drunk and resisting arrest. Ben pleaded guilty and got ten days or ten dollars.

"Call my wife, Alza," said Ben. "She'll give you the ten dollars."

"We called her this morning," said the jailer. "She said, 'Good, keep him there.'"

Ben knew his Alza. She had what was left of the \$500. She'd probably go shopping again today.

"I'll have to see my wife to get the money," he said. "You'll have to cut the cell open."

"Not on your life!" said the judge. "I can't destroy taxpayers' property that way. If you want out, you'll have to open the cell the same way you sealed it." The judge rapped with the mallet again. "Next case."

The next case was a civil suit by the finance company. The judge instructed the defendant that the best way out of that one was to open the vault, of course, after he had opened the cell door.

Sudddenly, Ben saw a ray of hope. The aircraft plant would be behind him one hundred per cent. "Call my plant," said Ben. "Mr.

Sheck will straighten things out for me."

"I believe the gentleman you refer to is present," said the judge.

"We feel we have need of Mr. Finlay," said Sheck. "But from present developments, if Mr. Finlay can't get himself out of the cell, he is useless to us." He faced Ben, his neck reddening with anger. "You see, Finlay, that cowling you smoothed out the night before last wasn't the only thing that got welded. The motor is fused solid. That's \$125,000 gone pouf. Unless, of course, you can do something about it."

Ben was thinking hard. He told them about the scientists he'd met in the bar. "Call them at UCLA. Maybe they can help me."

"They've already been interviewed," said the judge. "They've never heard of the Power being reversed. Theoretically, they say it's impossible."

SO, that was that. Ben saw the last ray of hope vanish. They were all against him. He was being tortured like a trapped animal. They couldn't understand, and people fear things they don't understand. Besides, they were all interested in the same thing — money. The finance company wanted \$25,000. The plant wanted \$125,000. And the judge wanted \$10 or ten days. Well, Ben Finlay had no intention of spending those

ten days in jail.

Even if he got out and survived the civil suits, he'd be forever getting mad and causing trouble. No one would give him a job. And the devil himself wouldn't be able to live with Alza after the balance of the \$500 was gone. There was absolutely no way out of this mess, except one. Ben Finlay would take that way, before their very eyes.

He removed the belt from around his waist and climbed up on the top bunk of the cell. He looped the belt around one of the overhead cell bars and buckled it. He then took a string from one of his shoes. He tied the belt with the shoe string, so the loop was about the right size for his head.

"Stop him!" cried the judge. "He's going to hang himself."

"Get a cutting torch!" bellowed the jailer. "Ain't nobody allowed to commit suicide in my jail."

Ben stuck his foot through the loop, to test it. He used the foot that had the shoe without a string. He found the loop sturdy as he bore down on it with his ankle. But his shoe fell off.

Instinctively, he reached to catch the falling shoe. He stumbled. His hips left the bunk and he found himself hanging head down, dangling by one shoeless foot.

The jailer was gripping the bars of the cell door, shaking them as his customers had done for years.

Ben dangled and began swearing lustily.

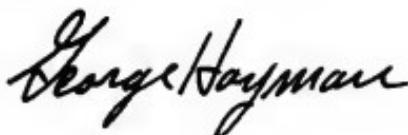
The jailer fell backward as the cell door suddenly swung open. That was it—the Power had been reversed! All Ben had to do to reverse it was to reverse himself.

BEN got a kick out of standing on his head in the finance office. Newspaper photographers took pictures, and everything. But the loan man had to stand on his head, too, so Ben could see a little of him, in order to get mad enough for the vault to open.

By the time the growing group of spectators reached the aircraft plant, Ben was having such a good time, he couldn't get angry.

But Mr. Sheck knew aircrafters. He had Ben's tool box brought out and opened. As Ben stood on his head in front of the huge airliner, Sheck kicked over the tool box, spilling tools over the runway. That did it.

Ben doesn't work in the plant any more, except to make major repairs in an emergency. He spends most of his days at UCLA with the scientists, trying to figure out where the Power comes from. But, with all the pretty coeds around, Ben seldom gets mad enough to give much of a demonstration.





Miss Tarmity's Profession

By ROY HUTCHINS

*She made a living by her nose
—and raised a devil of a stink
when Satan showed up in Vermont!*

Illustrated by KOSSIN

SOME say Old Scratch doesn't spend much time in Vermont, because the natives are just naturally so mean and cussed that they don't need his help. Leastwise, that's the story you'll hear across the river in New Hampshire, but everybody knows there hasn't been a New Hampshireman since Daniel Webster fit to twist the Devil's tail.

Fact is, the Old Boy does sneak around some in Vermont, but he's mighty careful about letting himself be recognized. He knows well



enough that even the women folk are likely to be more than he can handle. Found that out better than a century ago, up Poverty way, when the Ladies' Society held its annual picnic.

The way my Gramp tells it, that picnic was just the end of the affair. To understand what happened, you have to know Miss Tarmity and Mr. Higgins. The whole village of Poverty was concerned, but these two more than anybody, and they were Poverty's outstanding citizens.

Mr. Higgins was the biggest man in the countryside in just about every way. He had the best farm, the most money and a bass voice that rolled off the walls of the meeting house and shook the gravestones over in the cemetery. Folks felt right proud to have a man in the village who could shake the hand of a visiting State senator and not be the least mite flustered. They'd voted him one of the selectmen years ago and they automatically put him back at the end of each term.

MR. Higgins, along into his middle fifties, was a bachelor. That was no accident, but the result of some nimble sidestepping on his part. So many women had been flung at his head, he tended to shy if a bird flew over. The menfolk chuckled and allowed he was a smart one, and the village

wives snapped right back that he'd get his comeuppance some day.

Miss Tarmity had been the schoolteacher even longer than Mr. Higgins had been a selectman. She was a tiny body, but so straight and starchy that she walked tall alongside anybody. Her eye had been borrowed from a watchdog and her tongue from a sergeant major, folks said, but there was never any question about her spirit. That was all her own.

She had an ability besides teaching that made her even more valuable to the village. Anybody could teach, but only Miss Tarmity could smell trouble. It didn't interfere with smelling ordinary things, like flowers, or sausage frying, but trouble had, to her, an odor like nothing else, and it blocked out common smells so she couldn't miss it, when it occurred. Actually, the smell of trouble came in varying degrees. While it was mostly unpleasant, it could be almost sweet when warning her that a pair of nine-year-olds, bursting with energy like spring buds, were innocently trying to brain each other out in the schoolyard.

Of course, in a place as practical as a Vermont village, such a talent was put to use. Miss Tarmity made a tidy income on the side, sniffing crops and animals for signs of impending difficulty. With one whiff, at a cost of five cents, she could tell if weeds or bugs

were threatening a cornpatch, often saving the farmer days of unnecessary labor if they weren't. And hardly a man in the country-side would buy a horse or an ox without having her sniff the critter—ten cents—for incipient spavins or hoof rot. On deeds and legal documents, she demanded and got twenty cents. A clear title is a mighty important thing.

Community work she did free. Drummers and other strangers in town were quickly maneuvered up-wind from Miss Tarmity. At her nod, they were welcomed; upon her frown, they were escorted to the edge of the village and advised to try the next. Only once had she smelled serious trouble and it had nearly overpowered her with nausea. But she'd picked up her skirts and led the villagers blindly through the woods to a brush fire in a hidden valley back of Stone Mountain. That was in a dry year. Given a day's start, the resulting forest fire would have wiped out Poverty.

She had been orphaned at seventeen, before she discovered her talent. Everybody expected she'd get a husband pretty quick, by the ageless country method, if necessary. Instead, she wangled the schoolteacher's post, which paid ten dollars a month and board. Miss Tarmity was too independent, even then, to board out. She had her father's farm and his team

to plow the garden with, and she managed to get by all right.

IT was known that Mr. Higgins —young Dodd, in those days—was sort of sweet on her, but what with him so cautious and her so independent, Cupid busted a couple of arrows on them and gave up. For thirty-five years now, they'd been good friends, not agreeing on everything, but not disagreeing too often, either. Looked as though it would always be that way, until Mr. Higgins took a trip down to Rutland.

Miss Tarmity didn't even know he had returned when Mrs. Beall stopped her the morning she was hurrying to the general store for a bag of salt. She pulled up reluctantly in the path and turned into the August-burned grass toward the Beall house. The sun had been up long enough to prove it would be another bake-oven day. Already she could feel the heat through her high-necked, long-sleeved dress and she'd been hustling to get her salt and get home. Miss Tarmity often told her older girls it was unmaidenly to perspire in public.

"Mornin', Lettie," said Mrs. Beall from the door. "Step in and set a spell. It's too hot to be hurryin' and Grampa says it'll be hotter 'fore we git rain."

"Good morning, Charity," said Miss Tarmity, and then set her

lips stiffly when she saw the loose cotton thing Mrs. Beall had on for a dress. And her a married woman! But Charity looked cool and Miss Tarmity felt a pang that might have been envy, except it was most likely the cold biscuit she'd had for breakfast.

Mrs. Beall poked up the fire with a stick and swung the tea-kettle into place, chattering about the forthcoming ladies' picnic. Mrs. Turnbull, the chairlady, had asked if Miss Tarmity would bring some of her chicken sandwiches.

"I always do," said Miss Tarmity. "Two dozen."

She observed that Charity Beall was beginning to lose her figure and suddenly she smelled trouble. Not the everyday, sour-sweet trouble scent, but a strange and acrid kind she'd never known before. She noticed now the peculiar expression on Charity's face and realized that Charity was talking a little too fast, even for such an expert gossip. *Aha!* thought Miss Tarmity and sat up straighter in her chair.

There was a lull while Charity went to the cupboard. When she came back with her best cups, Miss Tarmity knew something was afoot.

Charity's peaked features were carefully composed as she leaned past Miss Tarmity to set out the cups. Only a sly gleam in her eyes and a furtiveness in her motions

told that she was about to get to the point.

"I s'pose you've seen Dodd Higgins since he got back?" remarked Charity.

Miss Tarmity allowed herself to relax a little.

"Haven't had occasion to," she said.

THE village had long since exhausted the possibilities for speculation about her friendship with Mr. Higgins. Not even Charity could rouse new interest there. Probably Dodd had brought some new gimcrack from the city, as he sometimes did, and Charity just had to build it up as a seventh wonder and tell her all about it.

"Why, he's been back two days," said Charity.

"And I've been putting down carrots and beets for three," Miss Tarmity replied with a little snap in her voice.

"Oh! 'Course, that explains it. Only it don't really, what with you being directly concerned, you might say."

"Tush," said Miss Tarmity, refusing to bite. "Dodd Higgins isn't directly concerned with me. Never has been and never will be."

"Goodness, no, not that way," exclaimed Charity, coloring and obviously enjoying herself tremendously. "Certainly not *now*."

"Well, I don't know. Guess I'm

as able as any," said Miss Tarmity, stung to daring. She eyed Charity's plumpness. "And livelier than some."

That should hold Charity Beall for a while, she decided, nevertheless feeling guilty and rather indecent. The trouble smell grew stronger. She watched Charity swallow painfully and grope for the teakettle to fill the pot, and a prickly unease made Miss Tarmity frown and adjust the pleats of her skirt.

Charity poured the tea carefully. Just as carefully, she said. "I'm not one to mix in people's business, but fair's fair. That's what I said to Mr. Beall. When a body's served others for years and years, the least they can do is show a body some consideration. Like an old hoss, I said. You put him out to pasture decently, not just turn him loose to starve."

Miss Tarmity scowled in the effort to make sense of this. "You mean folks are dissatisfied with something Mr. Higgins has done?"

"There's some are, and some aren't," said Charity, peering sharply over her teacup. "What I say is, the feelin's of the person concerned had ought to be taken into account."

Miss Tarmity let slip a tiny sigh of relief. "Folks often disagree with Dodd, but he has a way of being right. He's helped run the village so long, it isn't likely they'd

put him out now, Charity."

"Wasn't no question of that. But when a man comes back from Rutland with . . . Well, I guess he's reached the foolish age, but that's small excuse."

Miss Tarmity put down her cup with a firm gesture.

"Charity Beall, you've been a tease since the first day you came to my school. Now you've had your fun and I'm not going to listen to nonsense any longer. Just out and tell me what newfangled notion Dodd Higgins came back with this time."

Charity's hand went to her mouth and she did a poor job of looking flustered. Miss Tarmity smelled something terribly strong when she saw the eager eyes and witch's lips, and a trickle of chill worry stiffened her spine.

"Why, I never realized!" cried Charity falsely. "I thought you knew, or I'd have been the *last* to tell you."

"*What* did he bring back?" snapped Miss Tarmity in her schoolhouse voice.

Now the slyness and malice stood clearly on Charity's peaked face. She smiled.

"You poor thing! He brought a young hussy to be the new schoolmarm!"

MISS TARMITY had never been one to sidestep an issue. Folks still talked about the

time she met a bear in the school-house path, and the bear was the one that turned aside.

She was numb when she left the Beall place, conscious that Charity was watching from the door, but she marched straight toward the general store. Salt she had come out for, and salt she would get, if hell froze, the Devil turned blue and the world ground to a stop.

Miss Tarmity would get her salt and *then* she'd see.

If there was a mite less spring in her step than usual when she entered the general store, why, it might have been the heat, for all anyone could tell. Nate Barker was behind the counter and she noted the expression that crossed his face when he looked up and saw her coming around the flour barrel. There was a sudden silence over at the group around the checkerboard, and then Nate recovered.

"Howdy, Miss Tarmity," he said. "What can I get you today?"

"A pound of salt," she told him and turned deliberately to look at the loungers beyond the big, empty pot-stove. Seldom had a game of checkers in Barker's store received such quiet, intensive study. Old Wade was there, and Bub Miller, and she knew well enough what the talk had been that stopped so abruptly at her entrance. Not all gossips were female, she thought, with her lips tightening.

Bub Miller's mouth was twitching, and Miss Tarmity took a few determined steps over that way. She thought she detected a rather sour odor, but that might have been Old Wade.

Bub saw her coming and he reached hastily for the board, shoving a man directly into his opponent's path. Then Miss Tarmity was standing beside him, straight as the bore of a Pennsylvania rifle, and nobody moved at all. There were six men there and she looked at the six, all together and one at a time, as if she meant to remember them always.

MISS Tarmity picked up a black checker and jumped the red one Bub Miller had moved blindly, plus two others left vulnerable.

"You're wide open, Bub. Comes of tending to things besides your own business. I'd certainly hate to smell trouble on a young fellow like you."

Nate Barker handed Miss Tarmity a broad grin with her bag of salt and the store was still silent when she stepped out into the heat. Dodd Higgins' farm was around the bend on the river road, but Miss Tarmity took the path across Mead's pasture and through the woods, knowing it would be cooler as well as shorter. She walked with her head up, but without seeing the path or the woods, won-

dering what she could say to make Dodd see reason.

That was when she reeled from the smell of overwhelmingly big trouble for the second time in her life.

TH E Devil had had a difficult morning, what with a shipment of souls from the Orient who insisted he must be their revered ancestor, and another from the Arctic who huddled so gratefully on the eternal fires that he'd soared raging out of Hell. Badly in need of a laugh, he recalled the selectman from Poverty, against whom he'd thrown the ambitious and amoral young Rutland schoolteacher.

Disappointed at the lack of results to date, he was sitting on a stump, inducing some highly disturbing visions in the mind of Mr. Higgins, when he became aware that someone was approaching. The Devil was comfortably invisible, so he didn't bother to move. He saw the straight, angular spinster and he thought for a moment he'd get his laugh by placing a few ideas in her mind before she reached Mr. Higgins. But a second look quickly decided him against it. He knew human beings; some not even the Devil could tamper with.

To his surprise, he saw Miss Tarmity stagger and put her hands to her head, as if in dizziness. She

recovered and then her head came around until she was staring directly at the place where he sat, her nostrils quivering. For an instant, he was completely amazed, until a sense of danger swept over him and he dropped through the stump toward the security of Hell.

Miss Tarmity stood quite still. Briefly, she'd been nearly felled by the smell of bigger trouble than she'd dreamed existed. Then, abruptly, it was gone, and she'd never before known trouble to be cured without someone tending to it. But she had present facts to deal with, not momentary fancies, and the nearest fact was Mr. Higgins, whose house lay just ahead.

He admitted her to the cool kitchen without actually looking at her, and the same acrid odor was here that had startled her at Charity Beall's. But here it was much stronger and Miss Tarmity had to brace herself against it.

"Didn't know you were back from Rutland until this morning," she said.

MR. HIGGINS emitted a strangled sort of grunt and stared over her head at some point outside the kitchen door. A bad sign, she thought. He's feeling guilty and he'll be touchy as an old he-bear awakened in mid-winter. Well, if the field's rough, set the plow deep.

"Charity Beall told me you were



back and she told me other things, about a new schoolteacher for Poverty. I came to hear from you if that's true."

"Well, now, Lettie . . ." said Mr. Higgins uncomfortably.

"So it *is* true. Why? Everybody in the village who's younger than us got his learning from me. With some it took and with some it didn't — there'll always be the wise and the foolish. Does that mean I haven't been a good teacher?"

"No, no," protested Mr. Higgins. "You don't understand, Lettie. Down to Rutland, and in all the cities, they got new ways of doin' things, including teaching. To keep up with the world nowadays, a body's got to have better education. We can't let Poverty slip behind all the rest."

Still he wouldn't meet her eye. Miss Tarmity instinctively squared up to him for a moment. Then she sniffed the bitter air of trouble about him again and let her shoulders drop. Dodd Higgins was fighting himself. She'd have to find some other way.

"At least bring her out and introduce us," she suggested.

"Why, she ain't here!" exclaimed Mr. Higgins, looking shocked. "Mady — Miss Hunt, that is — is boardin' at the Browns'."

She might have known Charity would give her the wrong impression on that point, Miss Tarmity

thought. "Guess I'll meet her soon, then," she said aloud, and turned toward the door.

"Lettie . . ." began Dodd Higgins awkwardly. When she paused, he continued, "Guess you know there's nothing *personal* about this. We've always been friends and this is for the good of Poverty. Besides, you make more money smellin' trouble than keeping school, anyhow. I thought of all that and losing the school shouldn't bother you none."

"That's for me to say, isn't it, Dodd? But I'll tell you this — there's something bothers me a sight more than losing the school, and that's the smell of bad trouble around you."

He stared directly at her for a moment, then shifted uneasily. The big, booming voice went so low, she could scarcely hear it.

"No, Lettie, you've made a mistake this time. There couldn't be — anything like that."

"Suppose we let time tell," said Miss Tarmity. "That's my professional opinion. There's nothing *personal* about it! No charge, either."

HAVING made two stops on her way home, Miss Tarmity admitted to herself the time might have been better spent in her root cellar. Charlie Sayers and Bates North, Poverty's other two selectmen, were aligned solidly if un-

comfortably behind Mr. Higgins in the matter of a new schoolteacher. Charlie, whose eyesight wasn't very good until a pretty girl walked by, practically smacked his lips as he described the amazing teaching abilities of Miss Mady Hunt from Rutland. Bates retired into taciturnity, after stonily pointing out that the selectmen picked the schoolteacher and had to act for the good of the village.

She thought of stopping by the Browns' to meet this teaching marvel, but decided against it. She'd encounter Miss Hunt soon enough. First, she must try to decide how to wage her fight.

There was no hope from the selectmen — she'd already failed there. They'd been pushed or charmed onto the side of Miss Hunt, and there they'd stay. Miss Tarmity had struggled with the minds of Vermonters for thirty-five years and she knew how they worked.

There were just two things that could make the selectmen change their minds, she realized—either a complete reversal by Dodd Higgins, or an aroused village refusing to accept a new schoolmarm. The first was as unlikely as finding a stoneless field in Poverty. The second, however, might just be possible. Dred Taylor came plodding into her yard late in the afternoon, leading a long-legged horse.

"By Japers, it's hot!" he announced, wiping his brow. "Miss Lettie, I'm fixing to buy this here mare from Old Wade. Figgered I'd better have you sniff her over, just to make sure."

"Sorry, Dred," replied Miss Tarmity. "Guess I won't be doing that any more."

A hurt look spread over Dred's face and he fumbled in a shirt pocket, coming up finally with a shiny coin.

"I got the ten cents right here. Hain't I always paid you before, Miss Lettie?"

"Of course," said Miss Tarmity gently. "I know you pay your debts. But I'm not smelling trouble for anybody from now on. If Poverty doesn't want me as teacher, they'll have to do without my other services."

"Japers!" cried Dred. "But what'll I do about this mare? I got to give Old Wade an answer."

"I really don't know," said Miss Tarmity regretfully. "I put cotton in my nose when I saw you coming."

AN hour after Dred Taylor left, the procession began. Seemed as though everybody in Poverty had something he'd been meaning to have Miss Tarmity smell. If it was portable, he brought it along —Harry Glass, for instance, showed up with his daughter, who'd disappeared briefly with the hired

man during haying and was suspected of being in an interesting condition. If the object couldn't be moved, folks came to fetch Miss Tarmity to it.

But she stuffed more cotton in her nose and stiffened her straight back. The well-off tempted her with higher prices and the poor pleaded. To each she said no and repeated what she'd told Dred.

"Drat that Higgins and his bigety ideas!" said one. "What'll we do without you to smell out trouble for us?"

"Other places don't have anybody who can do what I can," said Miss Tarmity honestly, though she smiled to herself. "They get along."

Finally, only a trickle of people came and then none. Miss Tarmity removed her nose plugs, took a good breath of air and waited to see what would happen.

What happened was exactly nothing. Young Scott Miller, who was of more account than his brother Bub, stopped by two days later and told her that Mr. Higgins had taken his protégée to just about every home in the village and introduced her. Miss Hunt, apparently gifted with skills apart from teaching, had buttered up the wives like plump roasting birds and smiled bewitchingly upon the men. Even young Scott seemed badly affected as he told Miss Tarmity about it.

So her campaign to unite the village behind her had failed. Worse, Miss Tarmity realized suddenly, she'd gambled with her only remaining means of livelihood and lost. To go back on her vow would be unthinkable. The other alternatives seemed to be living upon her savings until she gracefully starved to death, or moving away from Poverty, where her family had been for a hundred and ten years.

THE day of the Ladies' Society picnic dawned the color of molton copper. Even after the sun was fully up, it hung balefully in a gauzy sky, promising heat with no sign of relief.

Miss Tarmity had her chicken sandwiches ready early, but she was deliberately late getting to the pond where the picnic was traditionally held. She made doubly sure of not meeting anyone on the way by cutting around behind Stone Mountain, instead of taking the path over the spur. Even in the woods, it was hot, a still, oppressive heat that clung like a shroud on the land.

Ahead, the shrill buzz she'd been hearing began to break into individual feminine noises. Every able-bodied woman past her fourteenth birthday would be here today and, as usual, they all seemed to be talking at once.

She located the path that wound

down from the spur and turned into it, emerging shortly at the edge of the pond, where sixty women instantly set up an excited gabble at her appearance.

Miss Tarmity said a general hello and a number of particular ones, and was relieved of her sandwiches by the chairlady. She braced herself to hear the latest on Mrs. Gaines' rheumatism and, hence, was unprepared when Liz Brown seized her arm.

"Lettie, dear," said Liz, "you must meet Mady Hunt!"

Miss Tarmity caught a confused glimpse of Charity Beall's pinched, eager face in the background, caught a bitter whiff of the trouble-smell — then she was being introduced to a self-assured young woman in a daring city dress. At least she had the figure for it, thought Miss Tarmity, *and Heaven help Dodd Higgins!*

"I'm so glad we've finally met," said Miss Hunt in a low, throbbing voice. "I've heard about your—ah—talent and we do have so much in common. The school, I mean."

Miss Tarmity recognized the sugary approach and wondered how soon the acid would burn through. The acrid odor that only she could detect was stronger now. She uttered a conventional greeting which passed almost unnoticed.

"I understand you're not smelling trouble any more," Miss Hunt

went on, "but perhaps that's wise. A man came through Rutland, claiming he could cure sick folks by the laying of hands on them, and I hear they have him in jail down in Boston. But I do want to have a long, long talk with you and get your advice about the schoolchildren."

"Indeed," said Miss Tarmity. "I'd heard your new methods were so good, you'd never need the help of an old-fashioned body like me."

NOW the Devil was in a snarling mood when he settled on the stump outside Dodd Higgins' place. There were so many stubborn damned souls trying to take over Hell that he was thinking of banking the fires and going South until they wore each other out. It was a sad day when he couldn't feel comfortable in his own domain.

Accordingly, he was not disposed to fool around with this Mr. Higgins. He wanted entertainment *now* and he wasn't going to wait for the hick to make a fool of himself in his own way. The Devil perched on his stump and flung a barrage of mad desires and sensory impressions into Mr. Higgins' mind that would have rocked the oldest roué in Paris.

After a short while, Mr. Higgins emerged from his house with a dazed expression and shambled

into the woods. The Old Boy licked his chops and rose easily into the air to follow. For a bit he was puzzled. Then he plucked from the selectman's churning brain the fact of the ladies' picnic. Better and better! This could be a highly amusing mess. It occurred to him that he could go ahead and perhaps line things up a bit for Mr. Higgins' arrival.

When he coasted, still invisible, down the still, hot hillside to the pond, he saw at a glance that the lunch was finished. The older ladies were chatting a bit drowsily, seated on the dry grass. Then he noted, to his delight, that a group of girls had walked several hundred yards around the shore, seeking a cooler spot. They were hidden from the matrons by an outward curve of the shoreline. What could be a better arrangement for a poor, bored, out-of-sorts Devil?

All he had to do was send back a mental call to change Mr. Higgins' course slightly and put a simple, attractive idea up to one of the girls. Then, when the mad-dened Mr. Higgins chased twenty naked girls back to their elders, all Vermont wouldn't contain the resulting mix-up.

He found a comfortable tree limb and leaned back to watch.

Below him, twenty young ladies, who were the pride of Poverty, stared out over the waters of the

pond, wishing for relief from the heat. They all realized the water was cool and inviting, but their training was strong and decent young women didn't do what they were thinking about. One, however, knew how to overcome that. She turned to another.

"Bet you don't dast take off your things and go swimming," she challenged.

The others gasped, more in admiration than shock.

"Well! Guess I do!"

Vermont tradition satisfied, a pile of dresses and petticoats grew in a moment and the girls splashed innocently into the pond, while the Devil chuckled fit to die up on his limb.

But he stopped laughing, aware that the plan was going awry. Mr. Higgins would arrive shortly and here the girls, being strong swimmers, were too far from shore. They'd just safely tread water and squeal for help when the man came on the scene—no fun in that.

He had to bring them back to shore.

Scare them back?

Then Lucifer had his idea—and made his biggest mistake since the time he tried to swipe Gabriel's horn.

MISS TARMITY listened to the buzz of conversation, wishing she were home getting about her spinning. Her lunch had been

spoiled by the sour trouble smell hanging over Miss Mady Hunt, and not even Charity's summer-apple pie tasted right. Furthermore, this sly cattiness was wearing on a body—Miss Tarmity liked to out and get things settled. Now the odor of trouble was getting stronger. What next?

But then it swept over her and she retched, knowing this was a separate thing, far bigger than any feud between two schoolmarms.

"Are you sick, Lettie?" asked Liz Brown apprehensively.

"I smell trouble!" gasped Miss Tarmity, fighting the nausea. "Worst . . . ever!"

"Oh, come," said Miss Hunt coolly. "Don't you think you've carried this far enough?"

"Worse than the fire," snapped Miss Tarmity, ignoring her. The other ladies stirred uneasily. Miss Tarmity was getting control now, despite the waves of illness that still came. Her sharp eye swept the clearing. "Where are the girls?"

"Why, they went for a walk," said Liz.

"That way," Miss Tarmity ordered, sniffing out the direction and staggering again when the full strength of the bitter smell hit her.

She started down the shore, but Miss Hunt blocked her way.

"Don't be silly," said Miss Hunt. "You've fooled these ladies for years, but you know perfectly

well nobody can smell such a thing as trouble. I won't let you spoil their picnic, just because you've lost the school—and a dear friend—to me."

"Young woman . . ." began Miss Tarmity in her schoolhouse voice, but then there came a screech fit to chill the August air.

Old Mrs. Turnbull went the color of stone-ground cornmeal and gasped, "Landation goodness, the girls have met a bear!"

"A bear?" echoed Miss Hunt weakly, falling aside.

Miss Tarmity grasped her arm. "Nonsense! None of my girls would be *that* scared of any bear. And they're your girls now—come on!"

WITH that, came another screech, this one sharp enough to saw the limb off a rock maple, and Miss Tarmity grabbed up her skirt and started to run along the shoreline, dragging Miss Hunt helplessly along.

After a sprint that burned her lungs with great mouthfuls of the terrible trouble odor, she burst around a clump of spruce with Miss Hunt, and then she stopped and just stared. For here was a big heap of clothes and there, in the water, twenty naked young ladies. Every last one of them was flailing toward dry land, hollering worse than a camp-meeting preacher.

RIIGHT in front of her were six or seven girls who had reached shallow water. But they were in such a hurry that they stood up and climbed right over each other, and now they were a splashing, thrashing tangle of pink arms and legs. They were still in a hurry, however, and the whole clambering pile was rolling toward shore.

Miss Tarmity watched all this for maybe ten seconds, with her jaw down to her hemline, when she heard a faint squeak from Miss Hunt. There, beside them, stood Dodd Higgins, staring first at the small mountain of nudity and then at Miss Hunt, with the look of a potentate whose harem had gone mad.

Miss Tarmity could smell that he was deep in the trouble, but she knew from his eyes that his head wasn't right. She took a step forward and said, "Dodd!" Then she reached back far and she swung high and fetched him a slap like a thunderclap.

His head near snapped off, but his eyes were sane when he got them uncrossed. Whereupon he gave a horrified look at the naked girls scrambling for shore. "Sufferin' Babel!" he gasped, and fled for the woods.

Immediately the trouble smell left him and the source seemed to swing out over the pond. Miss Tarmity strained her eyes past the

swimmers and saw nothing, though she noticed that the real loud shrieks came not from a few girls, but from one after another. They were all yelling pretty steady, but first one and then another would rear back and bounce a shriek off the White Mountains, clear over in New Hampshire. After that, the girl would kick like a jabbed heifer, fair rising out of the water like a hooked bass.

"There's *something* in the water besides girls," said Miss Tarmity.

"I'll run for help," offered Miss Hunt instantly.

"Don't stop till you reach Rutland," said Miss Tarmity.

Without hesitation, she started wading into the water, just as if she were jumping in to break up a fist fight or a dog fight back in her schoolyard.

She detoured the tangle of bodies flopping in the shallows and ignored swimmers in the home stretch. She plodded in with the angry eye of a setting hen until the water was above her waist, then stopped and peered into its depths. One of the young ladies came past on the surface, full head of steam up and raising a fine bow wave, so mindful of reaching port that she never noticed Miss Tarmity.

In her wake, Miss Tarmity spotted a dark shape, which wriggled close to the girl's legs and, at that moment, another screech split the bark on the birches. Miss Tarmity

plunged under water, grabbed something slippery and came up holding tight to it.

"*Got you!*" she gasped triumphantly and shook the water out of her eyes to see what she'd got.

IT was a big catfish with whiskers eight inches long, and Miss Tarmity saw at a glance that a meaner, shiftier-looking catfish never had lived. The trouble smell was so strong, she knew she couldn't stand worse and live through it. Suddenly she recalled that in fifty years she'd never heard of a catfish in those Vermont waters.

Right there, she realized whom she really had caught, and she clamped down on his gills quick because it's common knowledge that the Devil has to take a deep breath to change his shape.

He was flopping and squirming in her hands like a saved sinner, but Miss Tarmity had enough spit and hickory in her to hold two like him. She could tell from the look in his near catfish-eye that she'd be in misery up to *here* if he could get away. The expression in that eye was so downright nasty that she turned him around where all he could see was the black-walnut cross she wore on her mother's gold chain.

"Just you behave," she said tartly and, after that, he did.

Miss Tarmity trudged ashore with her catch and all her girls

clustered around to see what it was, forgetting clothes in their indignation. They weren't scared any more, not with Miss Tarmity there.

"He *tickled* me with those horrid whiskers!" squealed Patience Beall.

"Me, too!" cried Florence Howe.

"On my—"

"Girls!" said Miss Tarmity. "I've always taught you to be observant. Sniff this catfish. Just sniff him!"

"Sulphur!"

"A burny smell, too."

"Sulphur and brimstone is a trouble anyone can smell," said Miss Tarmity. "Appears to me that we've caught the Devil."

There was a chorus of shrieks and whinnies, and then Patience pointed a quivering finger.

"Look at his eye! He — he's *ogling* us!"

Truth was, the Devil couldn't get much air and he was nigh helpless, but he was a philosopher to the last. Vermont young ladies may have been a mite prim, but they were undeniably healthy and he viewed the ample surrounding scenery with the raffish eye of a connoisseur.

Miss Tarmity saw the leer in the catfish eye and the smirk on the catfish face and she whacked his nose for him. The young ladies scattered like plucked pullets,

grabbing in the pile for the first clothes that came to hand.

BUT when they were dressed, things took an ominous turn. The honor of Vermont womanhood had been besmirched and they gathered around the catfish angrily. Several suggestions were made, but Miss Tarmity, getting tired of holding him, said tartly that *she* didn't know anything about catfish anatomy and she wasn't sure their ideas would work. The Devil stopped quaking when he heard that, but they'd given him a turn, so he made a voice come out of the catfish.

"Listen, ladies," pleaded the Devil, "I'm powerfully sorry if I've offended you. I promise, if you let me go now, that I'll send each of you a fancy Eyetalian lace dress and I'll never come to these parts again. Your menfolk can go to Hell in their own way."

"You horrid thing!" cried Florence Howe. "Trying to cozen us with pretty dresses after you . . ."

She off with her boot and hit the catfish, and then they all lambasted him and even stuck hatpins into him. Finally Miss Tarmity said enough was enough.

"He must have learned his lesson," she said. "Besides, he knows that if he ever comes back, I'll smell him out. Now stand aside, girls."

She swung the catfish-Devil

over her head, heaved two-handed, and he arched through the air, landing on a great boulder which split with a *crack!* They all smelled the brimstone, forty feet away.

Miss Tarmity lined up the whole Ladies' Society right there by the edge of the pond and swore them to undying silence about the events of that day. But *that* story was too much for sixty ladies — even Vermont ladies, who could keep it if anybody could. Find Vermont on your map, which is easy, because the rest of New England hides behind it, and, up in the northeast corner, you'll notice a tiny body of water labeled *Ticklenaked Pond*. That's where the Devil got his due in Vermont, so you can see that the secret leaked out.

MISS HUNT apparently didn't stop running short of Rutland, and maybe not there, because nobody ever saw her again. Folks acted kind of sheepish when they told Miss Tarmity that the school would always be hers, and would she sniff Harry Glass' daughter now? The dratted girl was beginning to bulge.

"Trouble with her, she's just eating too much," Miss Tarmity informed the anxious father. "She's hankering for that hired man and just can't help herself—or helps herself to too much. She'd be all right, if it weren't for interfering parents with ideas about

what they want for a son-in-law."

Harry Glass sighed and said, "Well, 'twasn't really *my* idea. Missus Glass had her eye on—"

"You tell her to stop interfering or she'll have me to deal with," Miss Tarmity pronounced.

"Yes, *ma'am!*" said Harry Glass, looking relieved.

That evening, a penitent Dodd Higgins showed up. He said, "I never thought I'd make a danged fool of myself over any woman, Lettie, but since it seems I have, I guess it'd better be you I make a fool of myself with." He paused, eying her forbidding expression uneasily. "Maybe this proposal isn't exactly romantic, but—"

"No call to make a bigger idiot

of yourself," Miss Tarmity replied tartly. "I reckon we're both old enough to know our own minds. The answer is yes."

As for the Devil, he fled back to his own region, to nurse his bruises of flesh and spirit with applications of hot lava. Nor has he been seen up Poverty way since. Even elsewhere in Vermont, he's mighty careful about minding his manners, for the descendants of Dodd and Lettie Higgins have a way of smelling him out when he shows up to make trouble for anyone.



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